King of the Underworld

Chapter One

Chapter One

Sephie

I hear my white noise app cut off on my phone and my alarm slowly getting louder. I wait for the chiming bells to stop before I roll over and hit the screen. With a deep breath, I muster the energy to get out of bed and drag myself to the shower.

Another glorious day in the life of waiting tables. I stop myself from skipping to the shower I'm so excited at the prospect of being yelled at by angry customers again today. People are just cranky lately.

After my shower, I make myself a quick breakfast, even though it's late afternoon. Working the late shift means I miss the normal breakfast time, but let's be real. Bacon can be enjoyed any time of the day.

Once the dishes are done and washed, I grab my keys and my bag, locking the door on my way out. I live by myself. It's maybe not the best neighborhood, but all my neighbors are really nice, and we keep an eye on each other. When I turn around after locking my door, I see Mr. Turner walking up the steps to his apartment across the hall from mine.

"Hello, Miss Sephie. Going anywhere exciting?" He's slowly climbing the stairs, with his groceries in hand. It's Thursday, after all. Mr. Turner always stops by the grocery store on his way home on Thursdays.

"Hi, Mr. Turner. On my way to work. How was your day? Have any excitement at the hotel today?"

"No, not today, but I'm thankful for boring days, if I'm being honest."

Mr. Turner worked the door at the most expensive hotel downtown. He's been the doorman for 32 years and knows every single influential person in the city as a result.

"Boring days give you more time to find my Mr. Perfect, right? I like boring days too," I chuckle.

Mr. Turner laughs as he reaches his door and sets his groceries down to unlock it. "Don't you worry, Miss Sephie, I'll find you the perfect man one day. You deserve it."

"I don't know about that, but I'll take all the help I can get. Have a great night, Mr. Turner. I'll see you in the morning and as always, if you need anything, you call me." I waved goodnight to him as he walked in his apartment.

My smile lingers as I jog down the steps to the parking lot. Having great neighbors really can make a huge difference in your living situation.

Once I pull into the restaurant's parking lot, I find my normal parking space taken. I grumble to myself as I am forced to park farther away from the building now. I am nothing, if not a creature of habit. Not getting my normal parking space means this is going to be a rough night. *Hooray for Thursdays.*

When I step out of my car, I notice the storm clouds slowly rolling in. Inhaling deeply, I breathe in the sweet scent of incoming rain and relish the last moment of sanity before my shift starts. *I can do this.*

It's not just any Thursday. It's the last Thursday of the month, which means that all the crime bosses in the city meet at this restaurant to discuss "business." They reserve the back room and request that I serve them each time. I don't know if it's because I'm quiet, keep my head down most of the time, or if it's because I can remember what each boss likes and doesn't like, but they always request me. They always give me a fantastic tip, so it makes having to wait on known criminals somewhat manageable. Their tips are single-handedly funding my savings account, which means I'll be able to move out of my questionable neighborhood sooner, rather than later.

"Hey Sephie. Are you coming inside or are you just going to stand by your car with your eyes closed like a psycho all night?"

"Shut-up, Max. I'm coming, I'm coming," I say as I run to catch up to him. Max is the bartender and has his own fan club of women that come to the restaurant solely to be served drinks by him. His drinks aren't special. He's even admitted to watering down their drinks most days. They just want to stare at him while he smiles at them as he serves them their Cosmopolitans.

Max is tall, muscular, but a slender muscular. He looked like he could play in the NBA, not the NFL. His dirty blonde hair was shorter on the sides, but he was letting it grow longer on top. He said the women loved slightly longer hair these days, so he was conducting market research to see if longer hair got him more tips. Max had a boyish charm about him, but he knew how to use his emerald green eyes to get the ladies. One look from him and most women would swoon. I was apparently immune to that look. He tried it often on me, but I would laugh every time. He said I was good for his humility, if nothing else.

"Were you meditating just now? Do you need to find inner peace before the meeting tonight?" he teased as he opened the back door for me.

"I was trying to find the strength not to smack you, a-hole," I laughed as I walked into the kitchen.

"Oh. You wound me."

"I'm positive you will be able to find a woman to nurse your wounds, in…approximately 30 minutes," I say as I look at my watch to see how long we have before the bar opens. From Thursday to Sunday, the women flock to the bar to see Max.

"But none of them will ever have my heart the way you do, my little gingersnap," he says as he stands in front of me, leans into me, and gently tucks a loose curl behind my ear. He adjusts my thick braid over my shoulder and pretends to adjust the collar on my shirt.

I stare deeply into his big green eyes, as his fingers linger on my neck. Then I immediately break character into a fit of laughter as he also breaks and starts laughing.

"Go to work, Max."

The black SUVs start arriving around 8 pm. Max is completely swamped with single women vying for his attention at the bar but still takes the time to run back to the kitchen like he's a 5-year-old and yells, "THEY'RE HERE" and then runs back to the bar. I shake my head, laughing at his antics, take a deep breath, and steady myself for the night ahead.

The six bosses each come to this meeting with at least 2-4 additional people. Some are bodyguards, some are their children, and some are underbosses. The bosses are all very respectful, as are the bodyguards and the underbosses. It's the children that I loathe.

Sons of mafia bosses have the biggest egos I've ever encountered and worse, they feel entitled to act however they please. They're handsy, they're rude, and they all think that I should be throwing myself at them, simply because of who their fathers are.

Luckily, they don't come to every meeting, but they'll definitely be here tonight. Apparently, this meeting is extra important as the main boss. *the overlord? I don't know what to call him. Lord King Boss? Feels right* – the Lord King Boss – will be here tonight. He rarely makes appearances in public, so I'm a little at a loss as to what's so important that he would show up tonight, but I'm sure I'll get snippets throughout the night. Because I'm always the one that takes care of this meeting, I know more about the goings on in the city than I probably should. I keep that information to myself, of course. I'm not an idiot.

King of the Underworld

Chapter Two

Sephie

There is a steady stream of food to the back room throughout the night and the alcohol flows freely. I’ve gotten four smacks to my ass in the first hour. All the boss’s eldest sons are there. Lucky me.

Around 9:30, two new bodyguards, who are quite possibly the biggest men I’ve ever seen, walk into the restaurant as I’m waiting for Max to fill my latest alcohol order. Walking in right behind them, I see a man I don’t recognize, but can’t see clearly as the lights are dim in the restaurant. He steps fully inside the door, and I can clearly see his face. He’s tall, surprisingly young for a Lord King Boss, dark hair, two-day old stubble that I find myself wondering what would feel like against my neck, and he turns to look my direction with the most piercing blue eyes I think I’ve ever seen. He catches me staring at him and a sly smirk comes across his face. Just then, Max steps up behind me and gently pushes my shoulder.

“Hey, you should go escort him to the back room. He might not know where to go. I’ll have your drinks ready when you get back.”

I take a sharp breath in, broken out of my daze, and practically stumble toward the men at the front door.

“Uh…hi, I’m guessing you’re here for the meeting?”

His intense gaze leaves my face to scan down my body briefly and discreetly, as he reaches down to adjust the cuffs of his shirt. He looks up again and nods once.

Okay, man of many words. This, I can handle.

“Please, follow me.”

He nods once more, and all five men follow me to the back. There were two more bodyguards behind him that I couldn’t see until the first two units stepped further into the restaurant.

Before I open the door to the back room, I turn around to face them, asking “may I take your drink orders, gentlemen?”

One of the first bodyguards says, “yes, water for all of us, please.” His very thick, very Russian accent is very apparent.

I was surprised by his answer, so I cocked my head to the side, letting a “different” slip out before I realized I had said anything. My cheeks immediately flushed as I realized I had said the quiet part out loud.

“I’m so sorry. I mean no disrespect,” I said as I stared at the floor and stepped to the side while opening the door for them.

The first two bodyguards entered the room first, scanned the entire room, then nodded. The blue-eyed Lord King Boss stepped up closer to me while his bodyguards were scanning, that sly smirk on his face once again, and leaned in close enough that I could smell his intoxicating cologne.

“None taken,” he whispered, his Russian accent detectable as he stepped in front of his bodyguards to the welcoming greetings of the entire room.

“*What the fuck is wrong with me*,” I muttered to myself as I rushed back to the bar to get those drinks and to add five more waters to the order.

The mood in the room palpably changed after Mr. Lord King Boss joined the meeting. Everyone was very tense and very serious. What had happened while I was getting those drinks? I did a quick head count as I delivered each individual drink order. Ok, nobody died while I was away. This is a good sign.

I placed a refill of bourbon in front of one of the boss’s sons. Anthony, I think his name was. This was Anthony’s eleventh bourbon of the evening. Max knew better than to water down these drinks, so Anthony was getting the good stuff, at full strength. In layman’s terms, Anthony was drunk off his ass .

No sooner had the glass hit the table and Anthony reached back and smacked my ass with such force that I was thrown forward onto the table, giving the men across from Anthony a full view down my shirt. I caught myself on the table and pushed myself back upright, only to meet those steel blue eyes once again. Only this time he wasn’t smirking. Instead, his jaw was clenched.

I could feel my cheeks turning fully red as I apologized under my breath and quickly left the room. As soon as the door closed, I rushed through the kitchen and out the back door. Ugh, I hated the last Thursday of the month.

I walked to the dumpster and back a couple of times when I heard the kitchen door opening. One of the giant bodyguards came out first, quickly followed by the new guy. I stopped my pacing, not knowing how I was going to walk past him to get back to the restaurant.

He turned to his bodyguard, who handed him a cigarette and a lighter. Lazily putting the cigarette between his lips, he tilted his head down slightly as he cupped his hands around his face to light it. When the flame ignited, his face was illuminated, revealing that his blue eyes were focused on me. I was still frozen in the same spot, wondering how I was going to walk casually by this very powerful man back into the restaurant.

Oh, for fuck’s sake, just do it. After all, you have a job to do, Sephie.

I took a deep breath and walked up to the back door. I kept my gaze down until just before I reached the two men, but quickly glanced up and gave them the best smile I could muster, before reaching for the door. Just as my hand was about to make contact with the door, he reached out and gently grabbed my wrist, causing me to look at him in fearful confusion.

He must’ve seen the fear in my eyes because he immediately let go and raised both of his hands.

“Hey, not gonna hurt you. I just want to ask you some questions,” he said. His blue eyes, now darker, were so intense that it felt like he might be looking into my soul.

“Um, sure. What can I help you with? Did you want to order some food? Can I get you more than water?”

He let out a small chuckle, as did his bodyguard. What was so funny about me doing my job?

“No. But thank you. You’re very good at your job, but I don’t allow my men to drink when they’re working, and I never touch alcohol.”

“Oh…okay. Um, what kind of questions?”

“How well do you know those men in the meeting?”

“Um, I mean, define well? I’m always the waitress that serves them when they have their meetings. I know the older men by name, as they’re here every time. The younger men I have a harder time remembering because they aren’t always here. The sons aren’t always here either…thankfully” I whispered, once again realizing too late that I had said it out loud instead of in my head. “I know them more by their drink and food orders than anything else. I can tell you exactly what they like and don’t like when it comes to food and alcohol, but in the interest of self-preservation, that’s all the information I divulge on those men.”

He smirked at me and asked, “are they always so rude to you?”

“The older men, never. They’re very respectful. Most of the underbosses too are very respectful unless they drink too much. I’m not sure if their bodyguards know how to speak, because now that I think about it, I’ve never heard them say a word. The sons, though? What you saw earlier is a normal occurrence.

Especially when they’re all here. It’s like they try to outdo each other.”

He squinted his eyes slightly as he inhaled the smoke from his cigarette. Holding his breath for a second before turning his head to blow the smoke into the air, away from me, his eyes never leaving mine. Why did I feel like I could look in those eyes for hours and never get tired of it?

“Thank you, uhhh…I’m sorry. I didn’t catch your name?”

“Sephie.”

“Sephie? That’s an unusual name.”

“It’s short for Persephone. Most people have a hard time pronouncing it, so I just shortened it. Also, those who know are generally nervous once they find out I’m named after the Queen of the Underworld,” I said, looking down at my fidgeting hands. I really loved my name, but it did come with a weird history.

“Thank you, Persephone. You’ve been very insightful. I’m pleased to have met you tonight,” he said as he extended his hand to me.

I hesitantly placed my hand in his. He gently turned my hand over and brought it up to his lips. When his lips connected to the back of my hand, it was like fireworks went off in my stomach.

I tried not to be obvious about the sharp inhale I took as he kissed the back of my hand, so I said, “yes, you too…mister?” as I looked at him inquisitively.

“Adrik. You can call me Adrik.”

King of the Underworld

Chapter Three

Sephie

After my short interlude outside, I returned to work and tried my best to act like nothing happened. Anthony had apparently been chastised while I was away because he kept his hands to himself. This was new. Did Mr. Lord King Boss Adrik threaten him after I first went outside? Anthony had never stopped his juvenile antics before tonight.

I think I like Mr. Lord King Boss Adrik.

Most of the men had finished with their meals but were still deep in discussions. The room was tense, to say the least. I was busy picking up empty plates and taking them back to the kitchen. I recruited Max to help me pick up plates, so I wouldn't have to make so many trips. Just as he was about to enter the room, one of the bodyguards stopped him.

"Excuse me, sir. Only the lovely lady is allowed in the room," he said with his giant hand on Max's shoulder. Max wasn't a small guy either. He obviously worked out regularly and was well over six foot tall, but he looked small next to that absolute unit of a bodyguard.

I looked back at Max and smiled. "It's okay, Max. I'll get them. Thank you for offering to help."

I let out a sigh as I walked into the room. I glanced in Adrik's direction, only to notice his blue eyes staring at me once again. I quickly tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear and made myself busy.

After depositing another round of dirty dishes in the kitchen sinks, I walked out the kitchen door on my way back to the meeting room. In the back hallway, between the kitchen and the back room, I was met by none other than Anthony. He was coming out of the restroom, completely drunk, and acting like he might fall at any moment. I tried to hurry past him, but he caught my arm and pulled me back to stand right in front of him.

"Please let go of my arm. I have work to do," I said, trying to pull away from him. His vice-like grip on my arm only got tighter. Did bourbon give him some kind of superhuman strength? Seriously. How was his grip so strong?

"C'mon, you know you'd much rather go into the bathroom with me for a quickie," he said as he leaned in to try to kiss me, pushing me up against the wall so I couldn't easily get away from him. Ugh, his breath was horrendous and smelled like he'd drank the entire bar that night. Truthfully, he'd probably had half of it, at least. I turned my head to avoid his lips, which only served to piss him off. He said something in Italian, which I didn't understand because of his slurring, but he grabbed my other arm, again with his vice-like grip. He stepped even closer to me, as if that was possible. I could feel his entire body pressed against mine. I could even feel that he was getting aroused at standing so close to me.

He didn’t say anything for a moment. He just scanned up and down my body, his breath getting quicker, his pupils dilating. He released one arm and reached up to my face. With the back of his hand, he lightly grazed my cheek. I turned my head, trying once again to get away from him. He sighed.

“Do you know who I am? Do you know how many girls would love to be in your position right now?”

“Then why don’t you go find one of them. I’ll gladly tag her in,” I said.

“You have a smart mouth. I’ve always heard that redheads were firecrackers. Maybe someone needs to teach you a lesson.”

“No thanks. School really wasn’t my thing. I probably won’t pay attention if you try to teach me anything.” I was hoping to make him frustrated enough that he would move, and I could escape his grasp. Even if he lost a little focus, I was preparing to deck him and then I was going to make a break for it. I thought about screaming but didn’t want to cause a scene. The entire back room was armed with enough firepower that they could level the entire block if it came to it, so making a scene wasn’t my finest idea. I was also hoping someone would come out of the kitchen, but most of the staff had already left for the night, as it was a slow night in the front of the restaurant. Max was still at the bar, and he likely wouldn’t hear me anyway. I had to figure out how to get out of this mess on my own.

“There’s that smart mouth again,” he said as he ran his hand up my arm and slowly wrapped it around my neck. “Do you know what I do to women that don’t know when to shut up?” he asked as his grip slowly tightened around my neck. My entire body tensed, and my eyes went wide. I knew what was about to happen.

I felt my air being slowly cut off. *Well, shi*.* I definitely didn’t expect this to happen tonight. With my one free arm, I tried hitting him, but he had pressed his body against mine so tightly that I couldn’t get any kind of leverage on him, so my fist was practically useless.

“That’s it. I like it when they struggle. I like it when they beg me to stop.”

Perhaps my smart mouth wasn’t the attribute I thought it was. My mind was racing as I was trying to figure out how to get away from him when I heard the door to the back room open. Footsteps were approaching. No, multiple footsteps were approaching. One last feeble attempt to hit him and suddenly he wasn’t there anymore, and I was on the ground coughing and gasping for air.

I felt a hand on my shoulder and instantly panicked. I scooted away as quickly as I could.

“Whoa, whoa, Persephone. It’s okay. I won’t hurt you. You’re safe now.”

I raised my gaze and was met with those blue eyes once again. They were darker in this light, but showing nothing but concern, as he reached out to me one more time. This time, I didn’t move away. He put one arm around my shoulders, and I leaned into his chest. I realized I was crying. He gently stroked my hair and told me everything was going to be alright.

The next thing I knew, he hooked his other arm under my legs and picked me up, carrying me back to the kitchen. It was empty when we walked in. He walked over to one of the food prep tables and sat me down on the table.

Standing in front of me, he produced a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to me, his hands never leaving my thighs. I stared at his hands while I wiped the tears from my face and tried to compose myself.

I felt his hand, gently, under my chin. He raised my head and tilted it all the way back so he could look at my neck.

“You’re going to have a gnarly bruise tomorrow.”

“Perks of being a redhead. You can look at me hard enough and I’ll bruise.”

He chuckled softly and I let out a laugh as well. It might not be the healthiest coping mechanism, but humor made everything better for me. I’d endured some hard times and made it through because I never lost my sense of humor.

Adrik tenderly wrapped one of my loose curls around his finger, while he scanned my face, concern still in his eyes.

“Redheads have a special place in this world. Legend has it they stole the fires of He*ll and that they carry the mark of Cain.”

“It’s all true. I also steal souls, but only on the weekends. Work has been busy lately and I have a surplus of souls, with not enough storage space right now.”

A wide smile came across his face as he laughed. Good grief this man was handsome. I found myself smiling in response to his laughter and in that brief moment I had forgotten the events that led us to this moment.

“You are a unique woman, Persephone.”

“Yeah, that’s true too. Redheads are only 2% of the world’s population and of that 2%, only 2% have an eye color as unique as mine. So, basically, I’m a unicorn.”

I looked into his eyes as I was talking. His smile faded slightly and the intensity returned. He stared into my eyes long enough that I got nervous. I dropped my gaze and started fidgeting with my hands.

My body does this weird thing in response to trauma. It’s like I’m shivering, but I’m not cold. Of course, this was the moment that started up. My therapist had informed me years earlier that it was a somewhat normal trauma response. It hadn’t happened in years, so I wasn’t expecting it to start. I couldn’t get away from Adrik fast enough and he felt my legs shaking.

“Are you cold, solnishko? I can get you my jacket,” he said, his hands running up my arms to cover my bare skin.

“No, it’s…I’m fine,” I said as I hopped off the table. “I should get back to work. Thank you for helping me.” I folded my arms under my chest and walked out of the kitchen without looking back.

The past always has a way of showing up at the most inopportune times.

Chapter Four

Sephie

When I walked back into the meeting room, it was completely empty. Everyone had vanished. I can't say I was disappointed by this development. I busied myself with gathering up the empty glasses and the few plates I hadn't managed to clear already to take them to the kitchen. I hear Max whistling as he's walking down the hallway toward the back room.

"Hey, why did everyone leave in such a hurry?" he asked as he walked in and started to help me clear the tables.

"No idea," I said. I kept my gaze down, as I was once again on the verge of tears, trying desperately to keep them in so I wouldn't cry in front of Max. I hated crying in front of people.

"That was weird. I saw two of those giant bodyguards that came in last take a very drunk guy out front and beat the living shit out of him, then walk back inside like nothing happened."

I dropped the glass in my hand and looked at Max, wide-eyed.

"They did what??"

"Yeah, it was comical. And somewhat sad. But mostly comical. I think it was one of the guys you said was always an asshole to you, so I may or may not have cheered as the bodyguards came back in the restaurant."

“Max, you have to be careful. You know who these people are.”

“I know, I know, but I was cheering for the Karma that guy was clearly receiving. Hey, wait a minute – what the hell happened to your arms?? And your neck??”

“This was the reason for the Karma.”

“Holy shit, Sephie! Are you okay? What happened? Why didn’t you come get me?”

“I’m fine. That guy is always handsy, but he took it to a new level tonight. I might’ve provoked him slightly and made things worse, so he choked me.”

“No, no, no. Don’t you do that. Don’t you take any of the blame on yourself. That guy is a dick and he had every blow to the face he got tonight coming for putting his hands on you.”

“Yeah. I guess you’re right. I just want to close up so I can go home. I’m really tired.”

“Why don’t you just go? I’ll close everything up.”

“You know I’m not going to leave you here by yourself, Max. You might be a big, strong guy, but that’s still a jerk move. Everyone else is gone already.”

“You’re so stubborn you’d argue with the devil himself.”

“True story.”

Max just shook his head and laughed as he grabbed the last glass off the table and headed to the kitchen.

We quickly got everything cleaned up, put away, and ready for tomorrow’s lunch shift. We’d both been working at the restaurant for a few years now, so we had a routine down and worked together seamlessly. It always took us less time than everyone else to get our list of chores done in the restaurant before closing. We usually laughed and picked at each other during the whole process, so time passed quickly.

We walked out of the back door around 1 am. I stood and waited while he locked the back door, then we walked to our cars together. I was so busy looking at the still cloudy sky that I hadn’t noticed the black SUV parked between Max’s car and my car. I stopped dead in my tracks.

Max hadn’t noticed it yet, as he was looking at his phone. Probably texting whatever girl he was planning on hooking up with that night. He walked a few steps ahead of me, then noticed I was no longer beside him.

“Hey…. wha….” he said as he turned to find me frozen in place, a look of horror on my face as I was hoping the person in that SUV was not who I thought it was. Max looked at my face and then spun around to see the SUV parked between our cars. “Ohhhhh shit,” he said as he took a couple of steps back toward me. Without looking, he pushed me directly behind him as he watched the back door open.

I couldn’t see over Max’s shoulder and I was too scared to peek around him.

“What do you want?” Max yelled. I could feel him trying to be brave for me, but I could also feel how every muscle in his back was tense and rock hard.

“Please, don’t be scared. I only wish to pay Persephone for her excellent service tonight,” a deep and very calm voice said, his Russian accent evident. I recognized that voice. I peeked around Max’s shoulder and sure enough, Mr. Lord King Boss Adrik was walking slowly toward us.

I put my hand on Max’s back and said, “it’s okay, Max. He helped when…you know, Karma. It was his bodyguards.” Max visibly relaxed and inhaled deeply.

“Oh, thank God, I’m not gonna die tonight,” he said under his breath.

I giggled and reached up and kissed his cheek. “Thank you.”

“You know I got you, gingersnap.”

I walked toward my car and Adrik, who was watching me intently.

“Have you been waiting this whole time? You could’ve just come back into the restaurant. Or dropped it off tomorrow.”

“I had business to take care of. We drove back by and your cars were still here, so we waited. It wasn’t long,” he said as he handed me a fat stack of cash.

“Wha…noooo. This is too much. I can’t accept this,” I said, trying to hand the stack of hundred-dollar bills back to him.

“Please. You earned it,” he said as he once again gently grabbed my chin and tilted my head back so he could see my now darker bruise on my neck.

I could hear him curse under his breath but didn’t quite catch what he said as he inspected my bruise.

“It’s okay, really. I’m fine. I’ve had worse, honestly.”

His eyebrows furrowed into a frown as he scanned my face, once more tucking a loose curl behind my ear. Without realizing it, I leaned into his touch. My eyes closed and I took a deep breath. Just like when we were in the kitchen, I had a moment of complete peace. He placed his palm against my cheek, his thumb lightly caressing my face. I relished in the feeling, in the quiet, in the warmth that I felt in my entire body any time he touched me.

“Are you okay to drive home, solnishko?” His question broke me from my trance, and I momentarily forgot where I was.

“What? Oh. Yes. Yes, I’m fine. Sorry,” I said, quickly looking down at my bag to dig my keys out.

“No need to apologize. I think you need more of that in your life,” he said with that sexy smirk back on his face. If he only knew how correct he actually was…

Chapter Five

Sephie

I woke the next morning, well before my alarm went off, feeling like my throat was on fire. I stretched and immediately regretted it, as my entire body felt like I had been run over by a very large vehicle. Repeatedly.

“Well, that sucked,” I said out loud to myself. Instantly regretting my decision to speak, I started coughing uncontrollably.

I got myself to stop coughing and got out of bed.

No more outside thoughts, Sephie. Just inside thoughts.

My phone started ringing as I was walking out of the bathroom. I looked at the caller ID. It was Mr. Turner from across the hall. I immediately answered the call.

“Hey Mr. Turner, is everything alright?” I said in a half-whisper, hoping I didn’t cause another coughing attack.

“Good morning, Miss Sephie. Listen, I don’t want to alarm you, but there was a very large man standing outside your door this morning when I left for work. I asked him what his business was there and he said he’d been assigned to guard you, but he wouldn’t tell me anything else.”

“Well, that’s weird,” I said, biting my lower lip. I tried to think why anyone would be “assigned” to me. Reflexively, my hand went to my neck. “Mr. Turner, was this man the size of a house, with black hair, crew cut and a beard?”

He chuckled and said, “that’s a fitting description of him, yes. You know him?”

“I think I might have an idea. It’s okay, Mr. Turner. He’s one of the good ones. At least I think so.”

“Ok, Miss Sephie, if you say so. If you need anything, you call me right away. I got my old buddy’s son, on the force, on speed dial. I’ll have him to your place in no time if you need him.”

“Thank you, Mr. Turner. I really appreciate it, but I hopefully won’t need that. I promise I’ll call you if it’s not who I think it is.”

We said our goodbyes and I walked to my balcony door. I peeked outside and noticed the black SUV parked in the parking lot below, a few parking spaces from my car once again. The windows were tinted so dark that I could only see a giant hand resting on the steering wheel. As quietly as I could, I walked to the front door and looked through the peep hole. I couldn’t see all of him, but you can’t mistake a physique like that. It was one of the bodyguards that had delivered Anthony’s karma the night before.

I opened the door. He turned around as I said, “good morning, sir. Can I get you a coffee?”

He smiled warmly. “Good morning, Miss Sephie. Thank you, but I’m fine.”

“Don’t be a martyr. You can’t have slept much if you’ve been here since Mr. Turner from across the hall left. Wait, are you on meth? You’re on meth, aren’t you? Is that how you’re awake right now? Don’t lie to me. You might be four times as big as me, but I know kung fu.”

That got a belly laugh out of him.

“No, ma’am. Not on meth. I still have all my teeth – see?” he said in his thick Russian accent, showing me his teeth as proof of his abstinence from meth.

“Touché. But you’ve still gotta be tired. C’mon. You basically saved my life last night. The least I can do is make you a cup of coffee.”

His warm smile stretched across his face once more and he ran his hand through his buzzed hair. “Sure, Miss Sephie. That would be great,” he said.

“Does your pal in the parking lot want one too? You know, while I’m at it, can I get your names? For the coffee order, of course.”

He chuckled and said, “I’m Viktor. The guy in the parking lot is Andrei.”

“How very Russian of you both. Please, Viktor, come inside while I make the coffee. It’s weird to have you standing outside my door. I already give my neighbors enough gossip as it is without a gigantic Russian statue outside my door."

Another belly laugh from Viktor made me smile as well. He looked like he could kill you with his mind, but I could tell that Viktor had a heart of gold. He walked into my apartment, slightly nervous, but scanning the room like the dutiful guardian he is.

I busied myself in the kitchen, first pulling my wild, previously slept in hair into a bun on top of my head, then I set about making coffee.

"Are you hungry, Viktor? I can make breakfast too. I don't even know what time it is right now, but it's always bacon time in this house. Can Andrei come inside too, or do I need to make his to go?"

"No, please, Miss Sephie, that is not necessary."

"Um, hello. Saved my life. Least I can do. We've been over this, Viktor. Don't argue with me. You won't win."

He laughed, shaking his head. He just said one word, "ryzhiy."

I raised an eyebrow at him, waiting for a translation.

He chuckled. "Redhead," he responded.

"Damn skippy. Now how do you take your coffee? With the crushed-up bones of your enemies? Or without?"

This time, he slapped the counter he laughed so hard. He threw his head back and cackled.

“You are a funny woman, Miss Sephie.”

“It’s a gift.”

I set a coffee cup in front of him, along with milk and sugar, so he could make it the way he wanted.

“Are you going to call Andrei to come up here too? Or do I have to make you follow me out to the parking lot to deliver his coffee?”

“I will call him.”

“Smart man, Viktor. Smart man,” I said as I winked at him and set about getting the pans needed to cook breakfast.

In seemingly no time at all, there was a knock on my front door. Viktor immediately stood up from the bar at the kitchen counter where he was sitting. His hand instinctively going to his gun at his hip. He held his other hand up to me, indicating that I should stay where I was and to be quiet. For a moment, I struggled to breathe, wondering if it was someone other than Andrei at my door.

Viktor looked through the peep hole and opened the door, visibly relaxing as the door opened to reveal his equally sized cohort.

“Hi, Andrei,” I said from the kitchen, as he walked into my apartment.

“Good morning, Miss Sephie. Thank you for your hospitality,” he said in an even thicker Russian accent than the one Viktor had.

“It’s nothing. It’s the least I could do. You guys were so kind to me last night,” I said as they both took a seat at the kitchen bar. I set a coffee cup down in front of Andrei and noticed that both of them seemed to be…blushing? Of course, I doubled down.

“Max told me what you did to Anthony last night.” I reached out and grabbed one of Viktor’s hands and one of Andrei’s hands, giving them both a squeeze. “Thank you.”

They both turned as red as my hair. I smiled at both of them and quickly turned around so I wouldn’t laugh at how flushed their cheeks were. You’d think they’d never been touched by a girl before.

Chapter Six

Sephie

I grabbed the coffee and filled both of their cups, along with mine, to help ease the awkwardness of the moment. As I stood sipping my coffee, waiting for my soul to return to my body, and relishing the warmth on my very sore throat, I cocked my head to the side and asked, “so…. why are you two guarding me exactly? I mean, I’m not complaining, but I’m also confused as to why you’re here.”

They both exchanged a quick, uneasy glance and Viktor cleared his throat. He said, “Um, Miss Sephie, we are following orders. Boss was very clear that we were not to let you out of our sight.”

“Boss? You mean Mr. Lord King Boss Adrik?”

This time, it was Andrei that looked in surprise at Viktor. He asked Viktor a question in Russian. Viktor replied, his eyes now almost as wide as Andrei’s were. Andrei ran his hands through his dirty blonde hair, clearly surprised by whatever information he just learned. I cleared my throat to remind them that they were in my kitchen, and I was still waiting on an answer.

“Mr. Lord King Boss??” they both said in unison.

I laughed at myself for saying the quiet part out loud yet again.

“Um, yeah. I didn’t know who your boss was until last night and I didn’t know what to call him, so I came up with the title Lord King Boss. I mean, it’s authoritative. Strong. Monarchial, if you will. I feel like he should use it freely.”

They both looked at me with their mouths open, too stunned to reply.

“No? Too much? Ok, but it’s his loss,” I said, nonchalantly, as I plated their food.

As I turned to set their plates down, they were still somewhat stunned. I just started laughing at the absurdity of the whole situation, really. They both started laughing along with me, although I’m not sure they knew what to say to me in that moment.

“Oh, come on, boys. They don’t have sarcasm in Russia? It was a joke. If you boys have been assigned to me, for whatever reason, you’re going to be busy because this mouth gets me in a lot of trouble most days,” I said with my most demure smile I could muster.

They both shook their heads and laughed as they attacked their bacon and eggs like it was the first time they’d eaten in days.

We ate in silence. I only picked at my food, as it hurt to swallow too much at one time. The coffee initially felt good, but even that was beginning to burn the more I drank.

Viktor noticed my discomfort and said, “soup. Soup will make it feel better.” He pointed to his throat and then pointed to mine.

“Yeah? You say this like you have experience?”

“Da. I’ve been choked out many times.”

“Okay, so that’s terrifying and fascinating all at the same time. Is this a common problem in Russia? Like you’re just walking down the street and ‘oh fuck, I’m being choked again?’”

Both men started laughing again. Andrei stood up and grabbed both empty plates. There was not a morsel of food left on either plate. For a second, I was considering not even washing them because they already looked so clean. However, Andrei walked to the sink and began washing them himself.

“You can leave that. I’ll wash the dishes,” I said.

“No, Miss Sephie. You cook, I clean.”

“Wow. Do you want to get married?” I said as Viktor laughed at Andrei’s stunned expression. He almost dropped a plate when I asked him that question.

I just winked at him as I went to wipe off my counters.

Viktor pulled his phone from his pants pocket and walked into the living room to answer it, leaving a still stunned Andrei and I alone in the kitchen. He finished washing the dishes and was drying his hands off when he turned to me and asked, “he really told you his name last night?”

“Who did? Viktor? No, he told me this morning.”

“No, Boss.”

“Oh, Adrik? Yes, he told me his name last night when we were in the parking lot. Why?”

“No one outside of his closest bodyguards knows his name. He usually tells people his name is Ghost.”

I started to say something and then stopped, not sure how to take that news.

“Huh. I don’t know?” I said shrugging my shoulders.

Viktor hung up the phone and spoke to Andrei in Russian. It sounded very serious, but honestly, I couldn’t understand any of it. I was just leaning against the counter, hoping I’d get a translation at some point.

They had a tense exchange, but it didn’t look like I was going to get that translation, so I announced I needed to shower to get ready for work.

“No, sestrichka. No work tonight. We cleared it with your boss already. We stay here for now.”

“Okay, weird. But I’m still gonna go shower. If you need to shoot anybody, please don’t do it on the carpet. Blood stains are hard to get out of carpet. Much easier to clean up from the tile, so let’s keep the killing to the kitchen only, hmmm?” I said as I walked back to my bedroom. I could hear both of them chuckling and speaking Russian when I closed my bedroom door.

I leaned against my closed bedroom door and sighed. I was strangely totally fine with having two gigantic Russians in my living room that had been “assigned” to me for some unknown reason. My mind wandered to Adrik. Why was it seemingly a big deal that he had told me his name last night? Why did I feel like I was missing him? Why did I long to feel his warm touch against my skin again?

You really need a social life, Sephie. You’re becoming somewhat pathetic.

I shrugged off the thoughts and made my way to the shower. A nice, hot shower sounded a little like heaven for my sore body right now. Since I apparently wasn’t going to work tonight, I took an extra-long shower and deep conditioned my long, curly hair.

When I finally came out of my room, only Viktor was in the living room.

“Where did Andrei go?”

“He went back outside to keep an eye on the building. We need to know who’s coming in and out of the building.”

“Ha! Just ask Ms. Jackson in the apartment underneath mine. She spends her days spying on everyone. She’s already written your license plate number down and is waiting until Mr. Turner, from across the hall, gets home so she can give the number to him and have him call his buddy’s son who is a policeman to run the plates.”

“No shit?”

"No shit. It's partly why I've stayed in this crappy building so long. It's not the best neighborhood, but the neighborhood watch is superb."

Viktor just stared at me while he pulled his phone out of his pocket. He dialed a number and spoke Russian when the person answered. He then ended the call and put his phone back in his pants.

"Please tell me you didn't just order a hit on Ms. Jackson."

He chuckled and said, "No, no. We just need to take precautions. We technically don't exist, but we can take precautions that will satisfy your superb neighborhood watch."

"Cryptic. How do you not exist? Are you not standing in my living room? Am I having a psychotic break and I just made breakfast for three when it's really just me in here? Was I really that hungry?"

Okay, that was only partly a joke. How did they not exist?

"We are real. We just don't officially exist in anyone's database," he said, adding air quotes around the last word, for effect.

"Oh, right. The whole Ghost thing, right?"

"You are a very smart girl, sestrichka."

"It's a gift," I said as I winked at him.

Chapter Seven

Sephie

Since I didn’t have to work, I decided to turn my television on and mindlessly watch a movie. I was still quite tired from the festivities the night before, but I didn’t want to go back to sleep. I consulted with my giant guardian, and we decided on an action movie. As soon as the action started, Viktor was critiquing the hero’s every move. Actually, Viktor’s commentary on the movie turned out to be more interesting than the movie itself.

Even though I tried hard not to, I eventually fell asleep. When I awoke, I heard hushed voices in my kitchen. I assumed it was Viktor and Andrei, so I didn’t think before I said, “ok, which one of you is making me dinner?”

The talking stopped and there was silence for a moment, so I sat up on the couch and looked into the kitchen. That was definitely not Viktor standing in the kitchen and he was definitely not talking to Andrei.

“Shit,” I mumbled to myself as I leapt off the couch and tried to put distance between me and the two new giant Russians in my kitchen. “Who are you? Where did Viktor and Andrei go??”

“Calm down. I’m Ivan and this is Misha. We replaced Viktor and Andrei so they could get rest.”

I looked Ivan and Misha up and down. Misha was slightly taller than Ivan, but both men were just as huge as Viktor and Andrei. Ivan was bald, with a black goatee. He also had tattoos on his neck that I hadn't noticed the night before. Misha looked younger than the other three. He looked less threatening than the others, too. He had soft green eyes that gave the impression he was always smiling, even when he wasn't. They were a striking contrast to his black hair.

Misha said, "Ivan was just filling me in on information and then he was going back outside. We're sorry we woke you," he said in a rather mild Russian accent.

"No, it's okay. I didn't mean to fall asleep. Will Viktor and Andrei be back?" I asked. I felt weird missing them, but I suddenly felt a little empty knowing they weren't in my apartment.

Misha smiled gently, "Yes, Sephie. They'll be back in the morning. They needed sleep. We're working in shifts."

"So, they're really not on meth," I said scratching the back of my neck and stretching my arms over my head.

Ivan turned to me with the most intense gaze I think I'd ever seen. "WHAT?!?" he said as he started toward me. Misha grabbed his arm to prevent him from moving closer to me as I took a few more steps backward and ended up against the wall.

Misha stepped in front of Ivan, to both physically and visually block him from me. "Ivan, it's a joke. She was making a joke.

Viktor told me she makes jokes, especially when she's nervous. No one is on meth, especially not Viktor."

"I feel vulnerably diagnosed, but he's right. I was joking. I said Viktor was on meth because he couldn't have slept much before coming to my apartment before my neighbor left for work this morning."

Ivan took a deep breath. His body somewhat relaxed but his gaze was still burning holes in my soul. He turned his back to me and left my apartment.

I stayed against the wall for a few more seconds, just to make sure he didn't come back.

"Is he always such a jovial guy?"

Misha rubbed his face with his hands as he inhaled deeply. "Ivan didn't mean any harm. Ivan has very strong feelings about drug use."

"Noted."

Instead of making small talk with my new guardians, I gave up and just went to my bedroom. I was still tired, even after my nap. I figured extra sleep wasn't going to kill me.

I checked my phone. Three messages from Max, asking where I was, then giving me shit for not coming to work, and then genuinely asking if I was ok. I thought of Max like an older brother. He always gave me a hard time, but he also always made sure I was okay.

I'm fine, Maximus. My throat is still really sore, so the thought of having to speak all night long was too much for me.

Max: *Pics or it didn't happen, gingersnap*.

I snapped a quick selfie of my now very colorful neck and sent it to him.

Max: *Holy shit, Sephie. That looks amazing in the most painful way. I'm glad you decided to stay home. Nobody wants to look at that hot mess. You would've scared the customers away. I mean, more than you normally do.*

Ass. Your concern for both my well-being and more so your source of income is touching.

Max: *Lol. You know I'm just giving you shit. Seriously, that looks bad. Do you need anything? Want me to bring you some food when I get done tonight*?

Nah, I think I'm just going to go to bed. Sleep cures everything, right?

Max: *Alright. If you change your mind, let me know. I'll be your delivery boy any time*.

Thanks, Max. I'll be fine though. Try to not have too much fun without me tonight!

Max: *Yeah, you know it's not going to be fun – Kim came in to cover your shift*.

Oh shit. I’m sorry man. I didn’t know they were going to call her in. She usually only works days.

Max: *You’re going to owe me for this one*.

I locked my phone and put it on the charger. I went to the bathroom to wash my face. My neck really did look horrible. My bruise was a nice shade of purple and was so deep you could see the outline of his fingers.

Ugh. How am I going to cover this up tomorrow at work? I’m going to have to wear a turtleneck. Long-sleeved turtleneck too.

I lifted the sleeves of my shirt and looked at my arms, that were also a very nice shade of purple. The contrast of the color of the bruises to my porcelain white skin was striking, which just served to make the bruises that much more obvious.

I decided not to stress about it too much. With the extensive tip that Adrik gave me, I could afford to miss a couple of shifts and still be able to pay my bills.

I heard my phone chime again and went to check it, thinking it was Max again.

How are you feeling, solnishko? -Adrik

Wait, he has my phone number? When did that happen? Well, he knew where my apartment was, so I guess also having my phone number isn’t completely out of the realm of possibility. Who am I kidding, he probably has my bank account and entire record at this point. There is really no limit to the power these people possess.

I'm fine, Adrik. Thank you for asking. Tired, but fine.

Adrik: *Good. You should get rest. Put arnica on your bruises – it will help them heal faster. I'm sure by now they're quite dark*.

You ain't joking. My entire neck is purple. I'll have to go to the store for arnica. I don't have any.

Adrik: *I'll have some sent over. You rest. It will be there when you wake. Good night, Persephone.*

Thanks. Good night.

I locked my phone again and put it on my bedside table. I sat on my bed, lost in thought. Why did I suddenly have that warm feeling in my stomach again? Why was the top guy in the mafia checking on me? Why did he send his personal bodyguards to keep an eye on me? What was really going on? What happened in that meeting while I was out of the room?

Chapter Eight

Sephie

I fell asleep some time later. It was not a restful sleep, as I felt trapped in panic-laden dreams. In one dream, I relived the events of the night before. I struggled against Anthony, to try and get away from him, feeling once again the air leaving my lungs, feeling like my life was slowly slipping away. I couldn’t talk in my dream. I kept looking toward the back room of the restaurant, but no one was coming. There was only darkness. Silence. The darkness even consumed Anthony in front of me so that it was just me, not able to breathe or move. I don’t know where I got the strength, or air, to do it, but I screamed. I screamed as loud as I possibly could.

As soon as I woke up and realized it was a dream, my bedroom door was thrown open. Two men came rushing in and toward my bed. I screamed again, still not fully awake and aware of what was happening. One man came toward me, the other checked the rest of my room.

A vaguely familiar scent filled my nose, as I felt a warm touch on my arms and the bed dip beside me.

“Shhhh…you were having a nightmare. You’re safe. I won’t let anything happen to you ever again,” Adrik said as he wrapped his arms around me and pulled me to him.

“Adrik?”

“Yes, solnishko. You’re okay. You had a nightmare, but it wasn’t real. You’re okay now.”

I couldn’t stop the flood of emotions that came out as I leaned into his broad chest. I buried my face in his chest and cried.

“Let it out. You’ve had a big couple of days, but you’re okay now. I promise,” he said. He ran his hand slowly up and down my back, trying to calm my raw nerves from the nightmare. “Do you want to tell me about it?”

I took a deep breath in and wiped my face. I leaned back, with my eyes still closed, trying to find the courage to go through it one more time. He reached up with his thumb and gently wiped a few stray tears from my eyes as he waited for my answer. I opened my eyes and found his deep blue eyes, filled with concern, focused intently on me. I just stared into his eyes for a few moments, not able to speak. Why did I feel like I’ve known him for longer than 24 hours? Why did I feel safe in his arms?

When I didn’t answer, he gave me a smile and gently brushed my hair out of my face. “You’re even beautiful when you cry,” he said.

I blushed and looked down at my hands. I felt his hand under my chin, lifting my gaze back up to meet his. “Don’t hide your beautiful eyes from me, solnishko. I could stare into your unique eyes all day and all night and never get tired of the view.”

At this point, I knew my face was turning a nice shade of red. I didn’t know how to respond, so I said the first thing that came to mind. “Wait, how did you get here?”

He chuckled. “I brought you arnica. For your neck. I was discussing a matter with Ivan and Misha when we heard you scream. We thought you were in trouble or being kidnapped.”

“Why would anyone want to kidnap me?”

He cocked his head to the side and smiled slyly at me. “I could think of a few reasons.”

I clearly didn’t fully comprehend his answer. “I’m nobody. There’s no reason to kidnap me.”

“You’re not nobody, Persephone. And unfortunately, you’ve been marked by a powerful mafia boss’s son as an enemy. A petulant child of a son, but still the son of a powerful man. He won’t stop until he has his revenge for the disrespect he feels you caused him.”

“He thinks I disrespected him?? HE TRIED TO KILL ME!!”

“I know this. All the other bosses know this. Even his father knows this, but Anthony doesn’t take having his ass handed to him in public very well. No matter how deserved it was. His ego was wounded.”

I just stared at him as he spoke, trying not to think about how handsome he was, how gentle his touch felt, or how pragmatic his explanation of my impending doom was. “This is why you sent your bodyguards to stay with me? What about you? Aren't you in danger without them?"

He chuckled and shook his head. "I just told you that someone wants revenge on you, and you're worried about my safety?"

"Well, yeah."

"I'm well-protected, solnishko. I have other bodyguards, but Viktor, Andrei, Ivan, and Misha are my best, which is why I assigned them to you. I have complete trust in them."

"How long will they be here? When can I go back to work?"

"I'm not sure that's a good idea yet. We can't find Anthony yet. He disappeared after the meeting last night and no one seems to know where he went. We need to find him first before I feel confident about you going back to work." He saw my eyebrows furrow and added, "don't worry, solnishko. Your bills are covered."

"What? No. I can't ask you to do that."

"You didn't. I offered. Now accept my offer," he said giving me his gorgeous smile.

I got lost in his eyes. They were even more beautiful when he was smiling. While they could be cold and lifeless when he was in boss mode, when he smiled at me, they practically sparkled in the dim light of my bedroom. I found myself smiling in response to seeing the joy in his eyes. It made me want to see that joy every day.

“Fine. But I don’t have to like it,” I said, crossing my arms across my chest like a little kid, pouting.

He laughed again and this time, leaned in and kissed my forehead. My whole body felt warm at his touch, but when his lips pressed to my forehead, it was a new level of warmth. I was somewhat stunned at the gesture, but still found myself wanting more.

I grabbed his hand and held it between both of mine. “Thank you.”

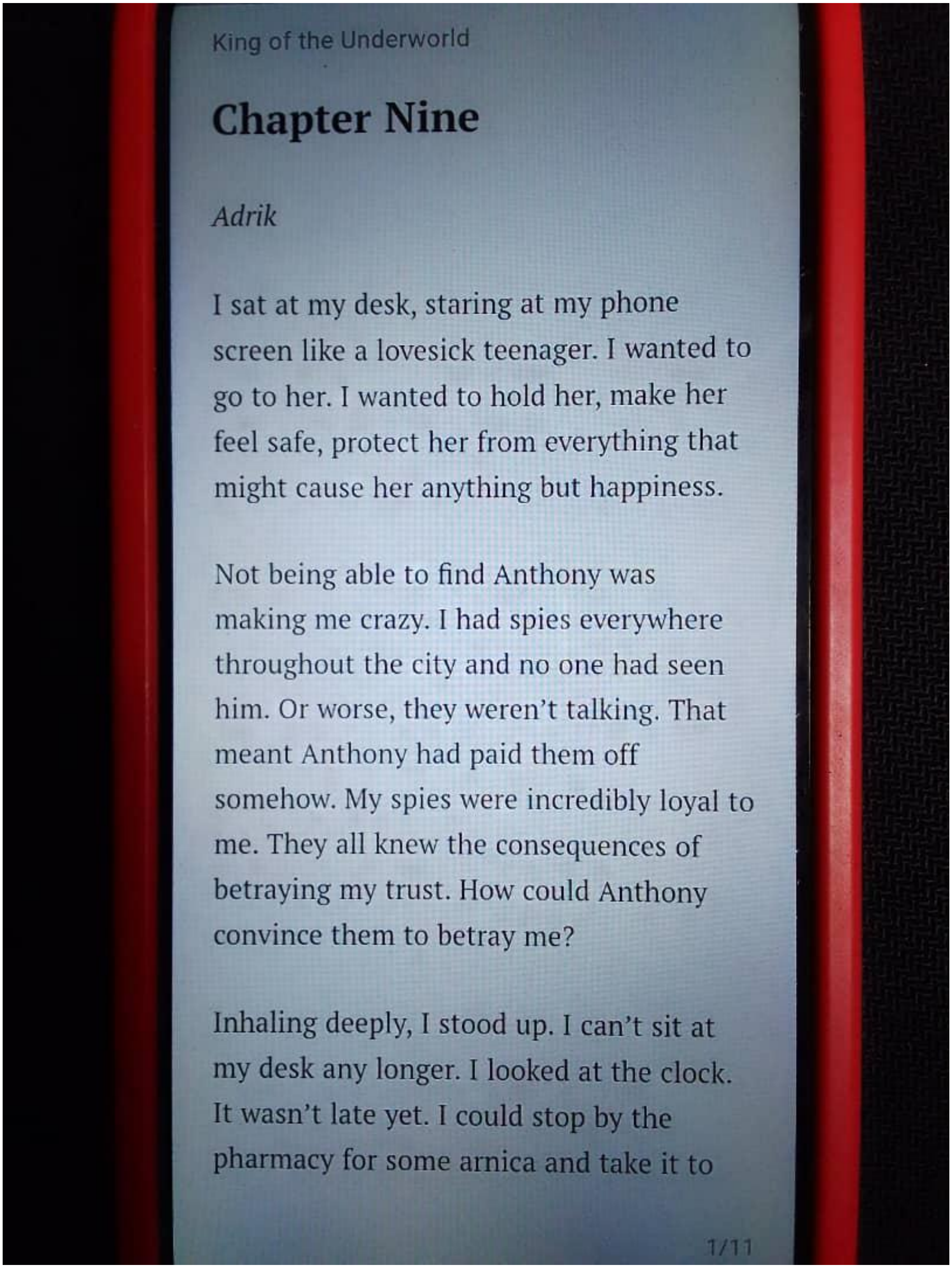
“Of course, solnishko. You should get some rest again.”

“Yeah, so about that, I’m gonna forego the whole nightmare thing for a while. I won’t be able to sleep again for a while.”

“Then, come. We will put some arnica on your purple neck,” he said as he grabbed my hand and stood up. He pulled me up before I could stop him.

“Oh… wait…” I said as I stood up, revealing that I was only wearing a large t-shirt and no pants.

He slowly looked down my body, as I tried to pull my t-shirt as low as it would go. His eyes got darker. I noticed his jaw clench slightly and he made a fist with his hand that was not holding mine. His gaze returned to my face, and he leaned in to kiss my forehead saying, “apologies. I’ll meet you in the kitchen.”



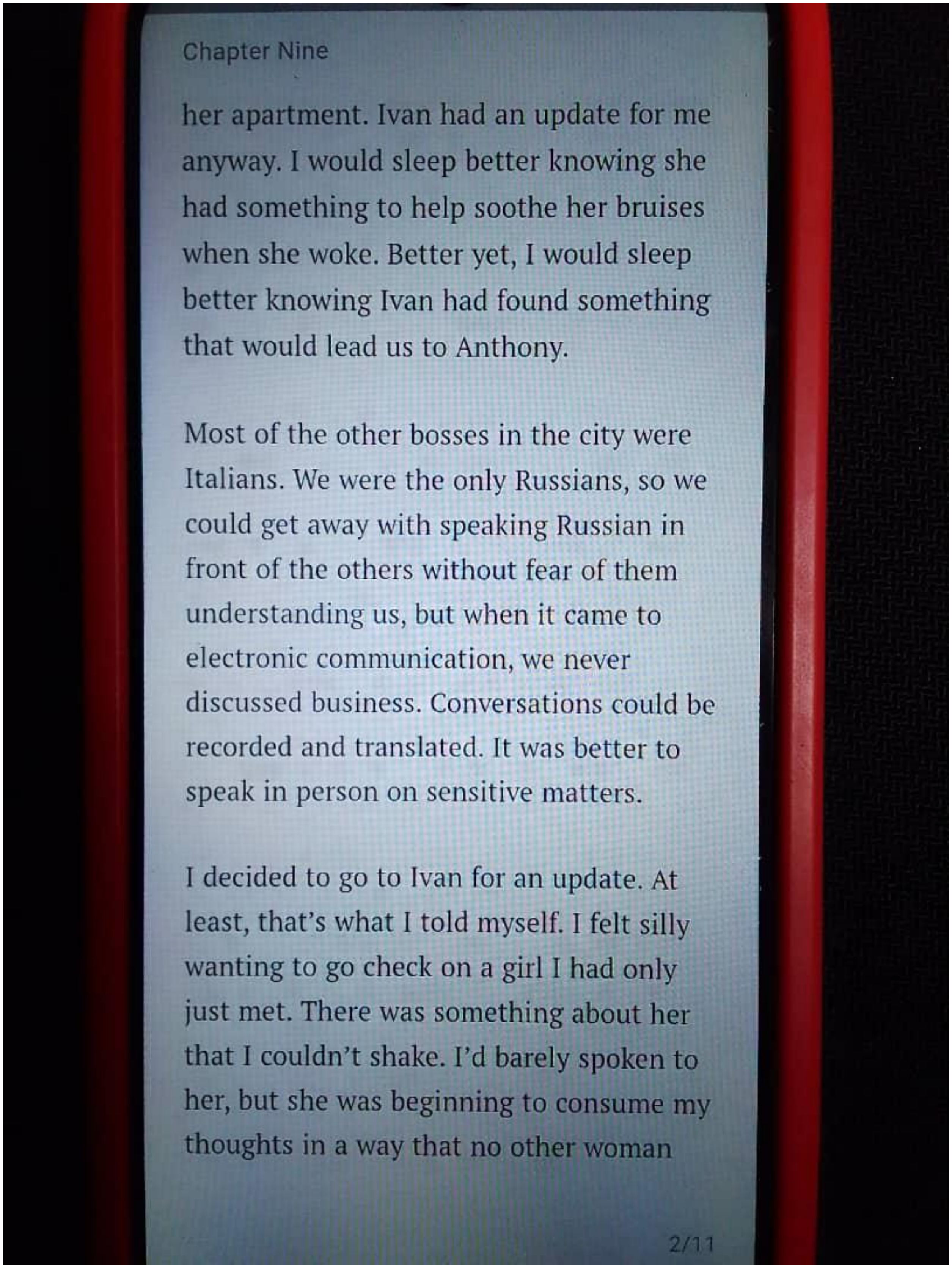
Chapter Nine

Adrik

I sat at my desk, staring at my phone screen like a lovesick teenager. I wanted to go to her. I wanted to hold her, make her feel safe, protect her from everything that might cause her anything but happiness.

Not being able to find Anthony was making me crazy. I had spies everywhere throughout the city and no one had seen him. Or worse, they weren't talking. That meant Anthony had paid them off somehow. My spies were incredibly loyal to me. They all knew the consequences of betraying my trust. How could Anthony convince them to betray me?

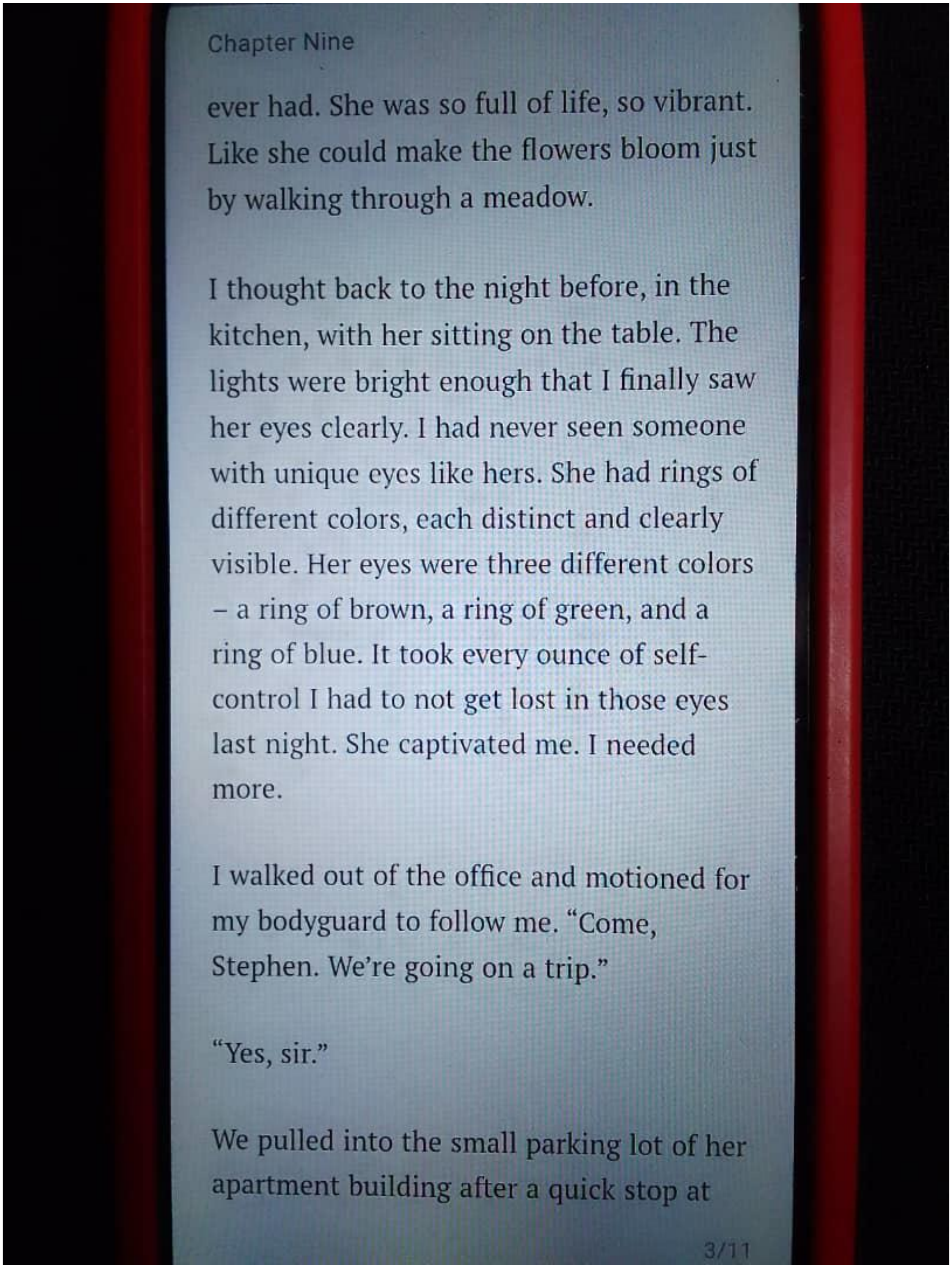
Inhaling deeply, I stood up. I can't sit at my desk any longer. I looked at the clock. It wasn't late yet. I could stop by the pharmacy for some arnica and take it to



her apartment. Ivan had an update for me anyway. I would sleep better knowing she had something to help soothe her bruises when she woke. Better yet, I would sleep better knowing Ivan had found something that would lead us to Anthony.

Most of the other bosses in the city were Italians. We were the only Russians, so we could get away with speaking Russian in front of the others without fear of them understanding us, but when it came to electronic communication, we never discussed business. Conversations could be recorded and translated. It was better to speak in person on sensitive matters.

I decided to go to Ivan for an update. At least, that's what I told myself. I felt silly wanting to go check on a girl I had only just met. There was something about her that I couldn't shake. I'd barely spoken to her, but she was beginning to consume my thoughts in a way that no other woman



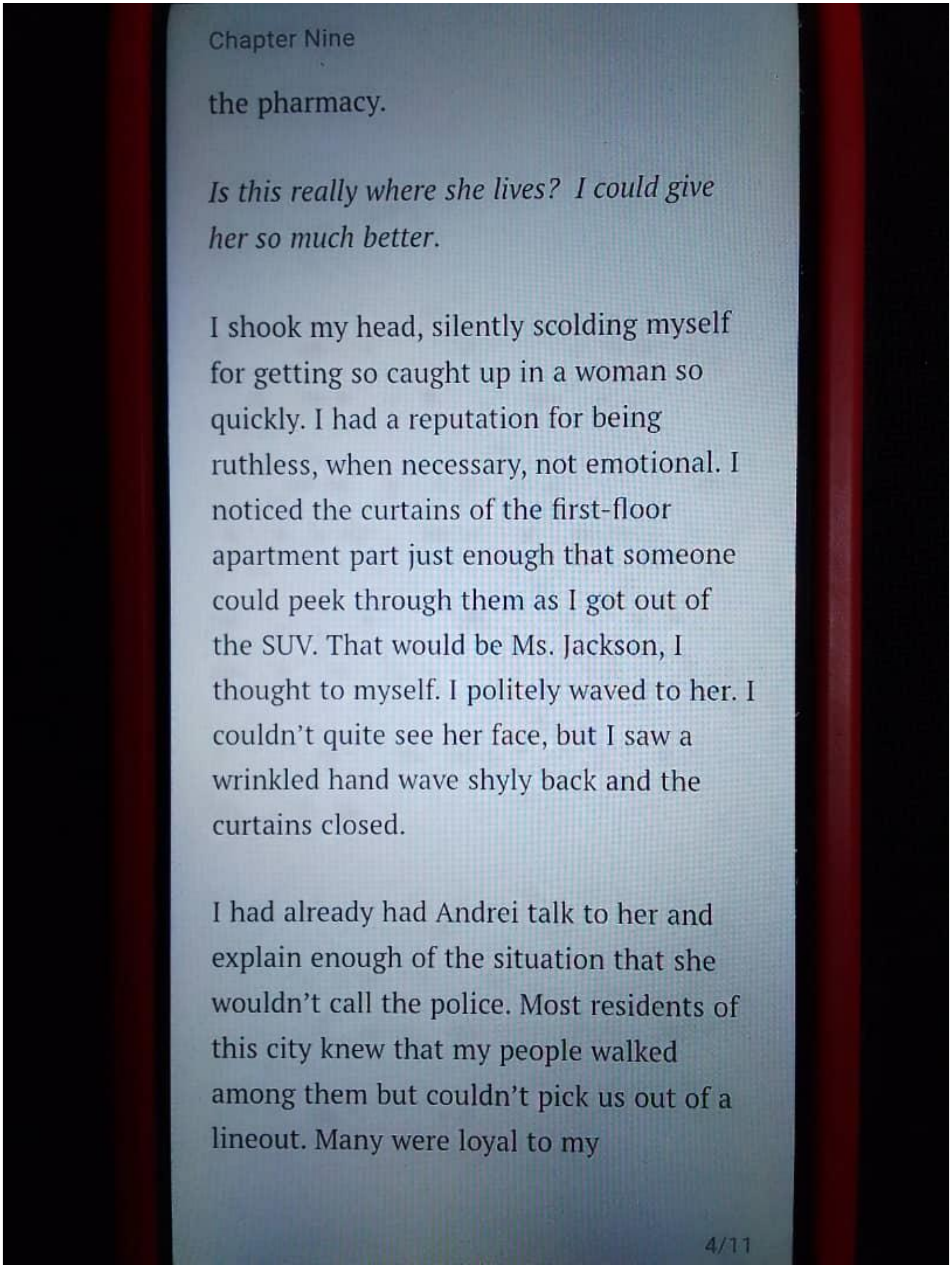
ever had. She was so full of life, so vibrant. Like she could make the flowers bloom just by walking through a meadow.

I thought back to the night before, in the kitchen, with her sitting on the table. The lights were bright enough that I finally saw her eyes clearly. I had never seen someone with unique eyes like hers. She had rings of different colors, each distinct and clearly visible. Her eyes were three different colors – a ring of brown, a ring of green, and a ring of blue. It took every ounce of self-control I had to not get lost in those eyes last night. She captivated me. I needed more.

I walked out of the office and motioned for my bodyguard to follow me. “Come, Stephen. We’re going on a trip.”

“Yes, sir.”

We pulled into the small parking lot of her apartment building after a quick stop at

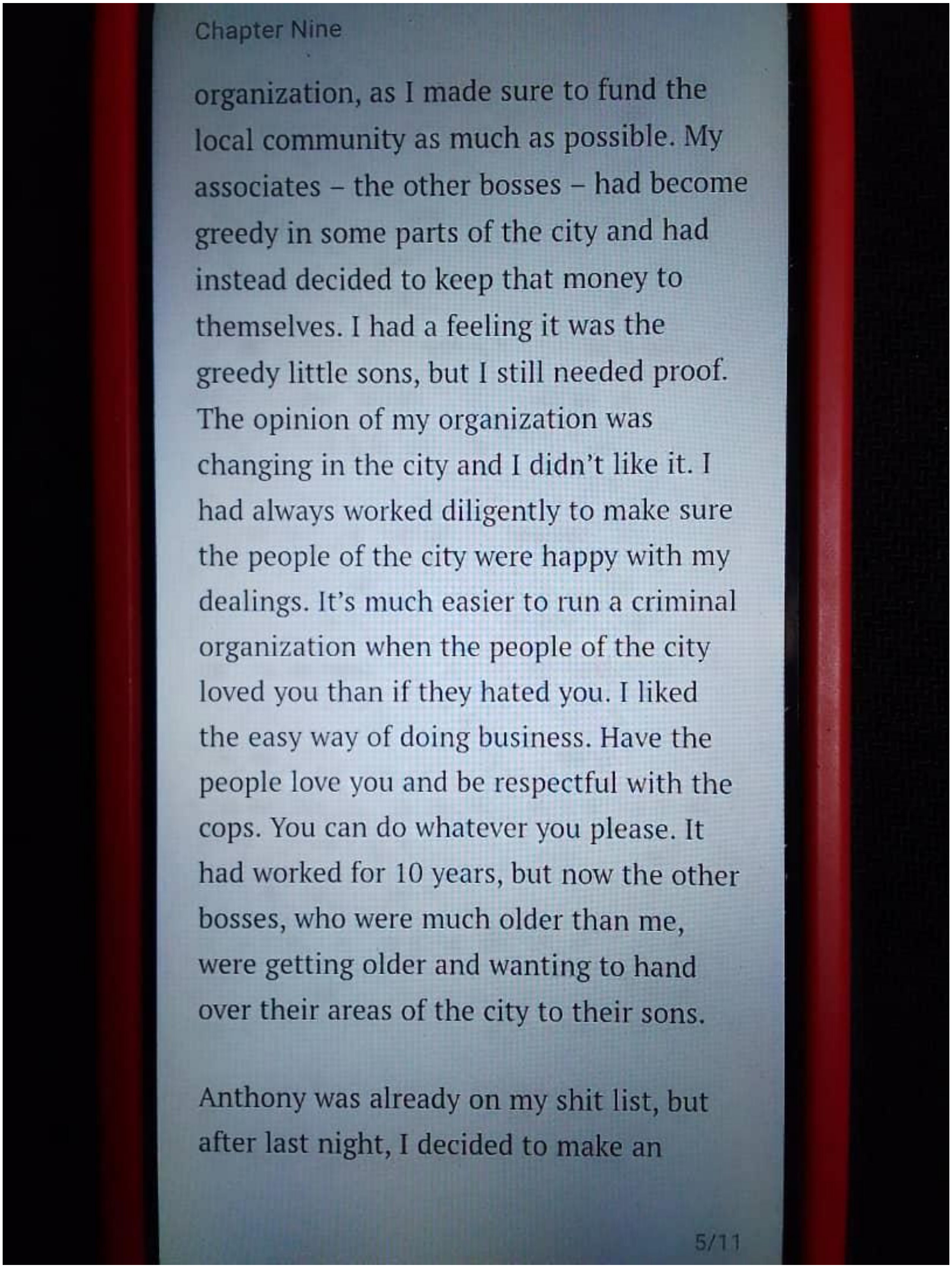


the pharmacy.

Is this really where she lives? I could give her so much better.

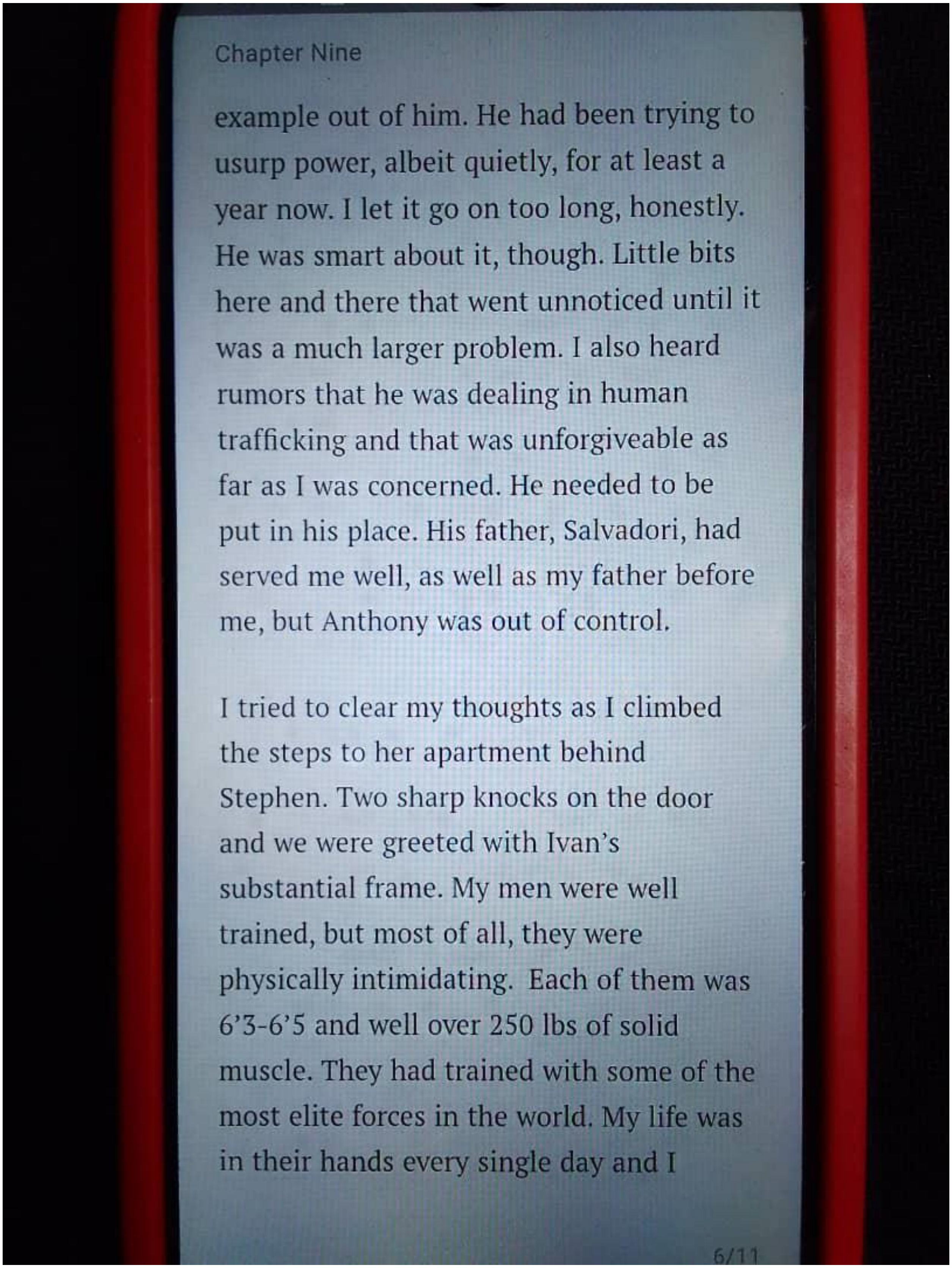
I shook my head, silently scolding myself for getting so caught up in a woman so quickly. I had a reputation for being ruthless, when necessary, not emotional. I noticed the curtains of the first-floor apartment part just enough that someone could peek through them as I got out of the SUV. That would be Ms. Jackson, I thought to myself. I politely waved to her. I couldn't quite see her face, but I saw a wrinkled hand wave shyly back and the curtains closed.

I had already had Andrei talk to her and explain enough of the situation that she wouldn't call the police. Most residents of this city knew that my people walked among them but couldn't pick us out of a lineout. Many were loyal to my



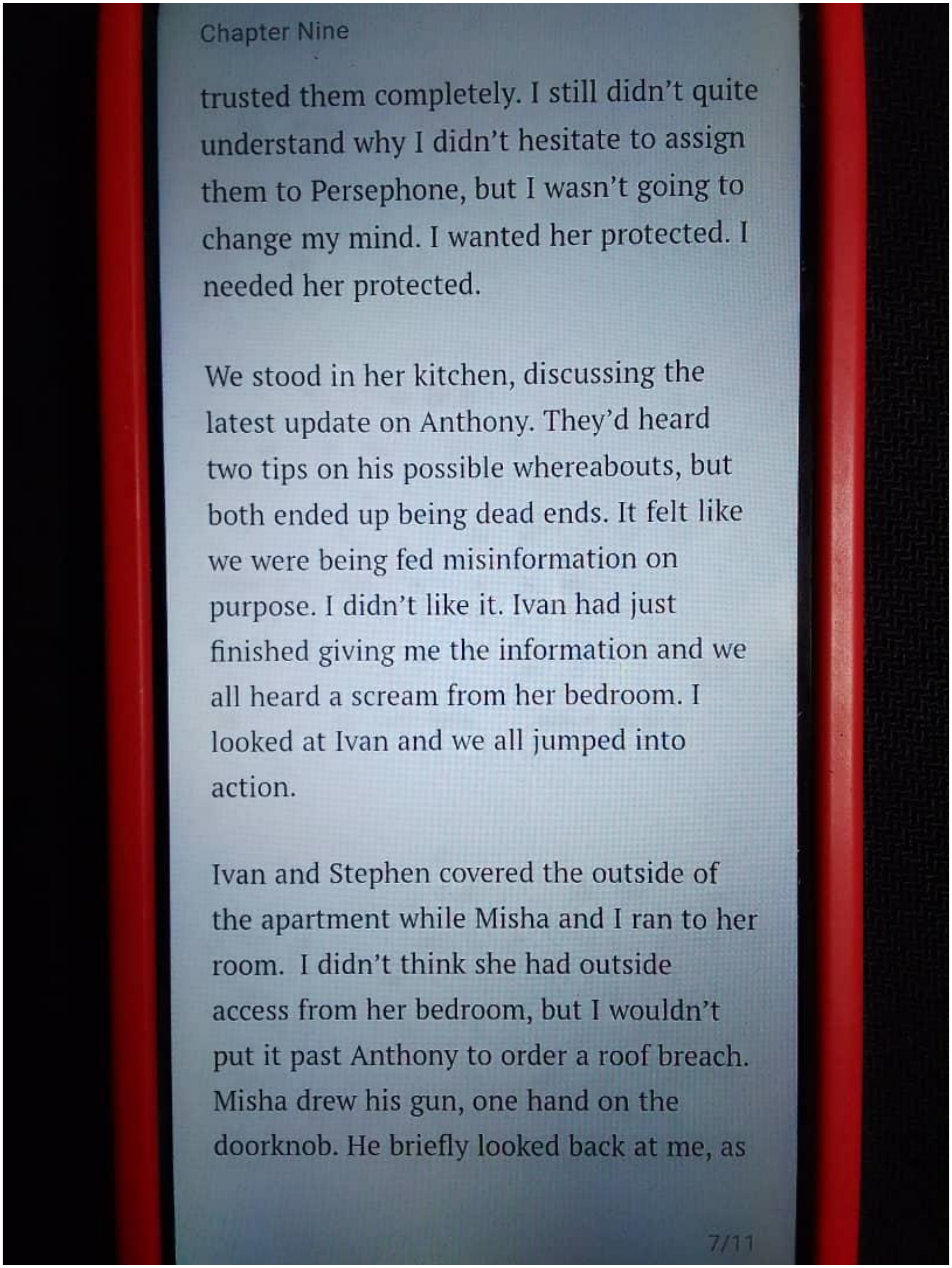
organization, as I made sure to fund the local community as much as possible. My associates – the other bosses – had become greedy in some parts of the city and had instead decided to keep that money to themselves. I had a feeling it was the greedy little sons, but I still needed proof. The opinion of my organization was changing in the city and I didn't like it. I had always worked diligently to make sure the people of the city were happy with my dealings. It's much easier to run a criminal organization when the people of the city loved you than if they hated you. I liked the easy way of doing business. Have the people love you and be respectful with the cops. You can do whatever you please. It had worked for 10 years, but now the other bosses, who were much older than me, were getting older and wanting to hand over their areas of the city to their sons.

Anthony was already on my shit list, but after last night, I decided to make an



example out of him. He had been trying to usurp power, albeit quietly, for at least a year now. I let it go on too long, honestly. He was smart about it, though. Little bits here and there that went unnoticed until it was a much larger problem. I also heard rumors that he was dealing in human trafficking and that was unforgiveable as far as I was concerned. He needed to be put in his place. His father, Salvadori, had served me well, as well as my father before me, but Anthony was out of control.

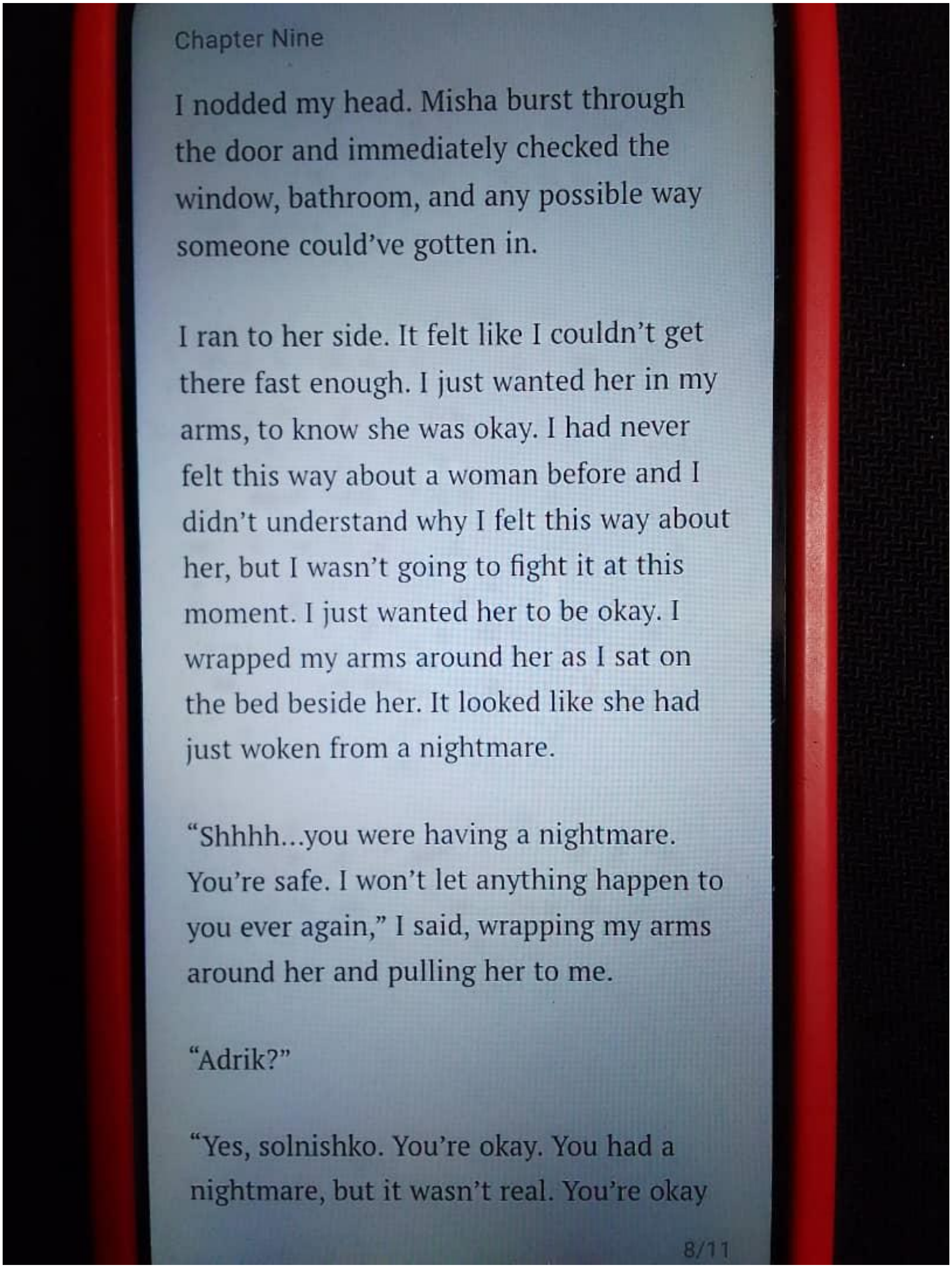
I tried to clear my thoughts as I climbed the steps to her apartment behind Stephen. Two sharp knocks on the door and we were greeted with Ivan's substantial frame. My men were well trained, but most of all, they were physically intimidating. Each of them was 6'3-6'5 and well over 250 lbs of solid muscle. They had trained with some of the most elite forces in the world. My life was in their hands every single day and I



trusted them completely. I still didn't quite understand why I didn't hesitate to assign them to Persephone, but I wasn't going to change my mind. I wanted her protected. I needed her protected.

We stood in her kitchen, discussing the latest update on Anthony. They'd heard two tips on his possible whereabouts, but both ended up being dead ends. It felt like we were being fed misinformation on purpose. I didn't like it. Ivan had just finished giving me the information and we all heard a scream from her bedroom. I looked at Ivan and we all jumped into action.

Ivan and Stephen covered the outside of the apartment while Misha and I ran to her room. I didn't think she had outside access from her bedroom, but I wouldn't put it past Anthony to order a roof breach. Misha drew his gun, one hand on the doorknob. He briefly looked back at me, as



I nodded my head. Misha burst through the door and immediately checked the window, bathroom, and any possible way someone could've gotten in.

I ran to her side. It felt like I couldn't get there fast enough. I just wanted her in my arms, to know she was okay. I had never felt this way about a woman before and I didn't understand why I felt this way about her, but I wasn't going to fight it at this moment. I just wanted her to be okay. I wrapped my arms around her as I sat on the bed beside her. It looked like she had just woken from a nightmare.

"Shhhh…you were having a nightmare. You're safe. I won't let anything happen to you ever again," I said, wrapping my arms around her and pulling her to me.

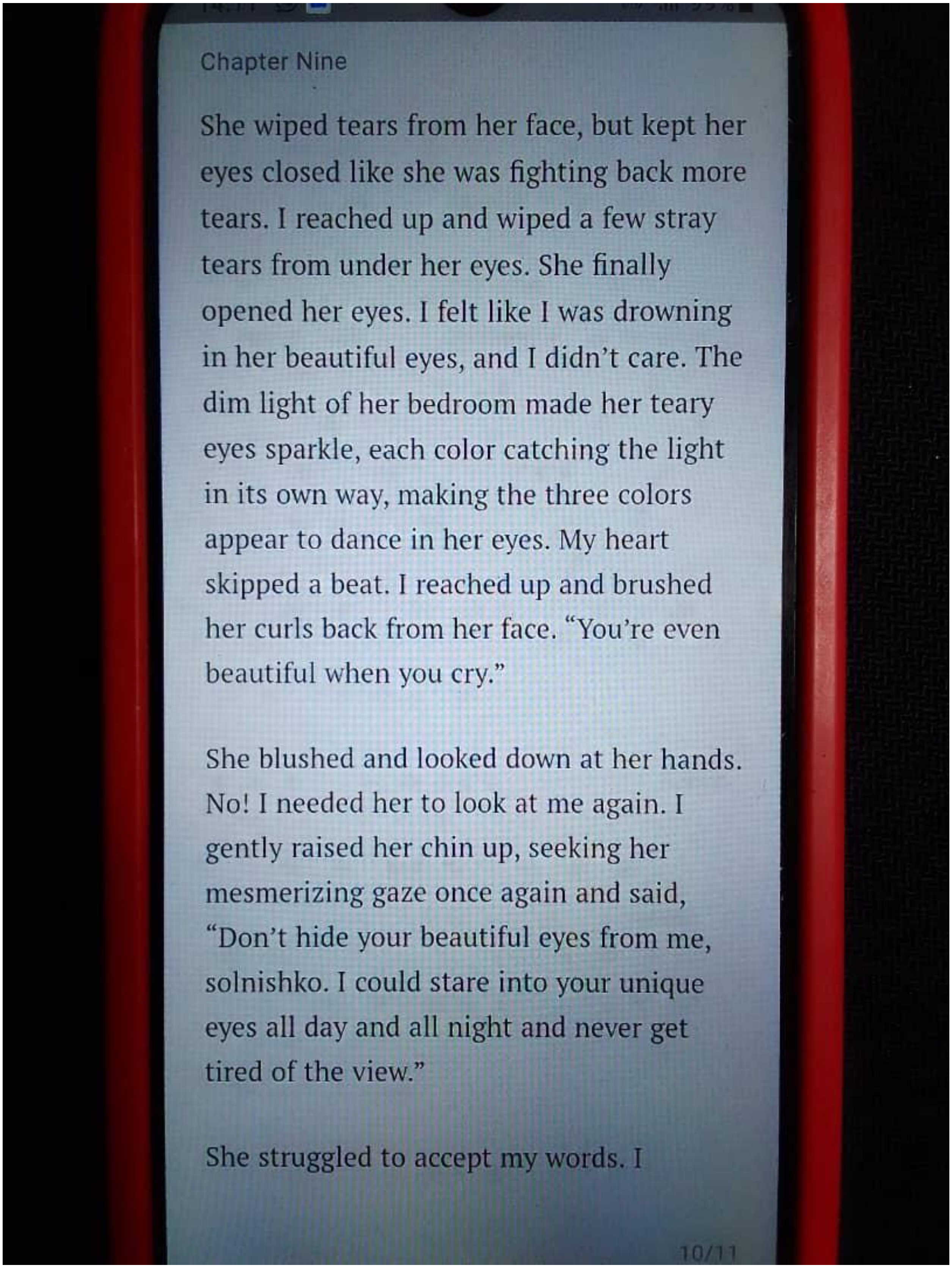
"Adrik?"

"Yes, solnishko. You're okay. You had a nightmare, but it wasn't real. You're okay now."

Her body was shaking slightly. I noticed she did that last night too. When I sat her on the table in the kitchen, after that piece of shit dared to lay his hands on her, she started shaking uncontrollably. It wasn't to the same level now, but she was definitely shaking. I felt a tightness in my chest that I was not accustomed to. I wanted to make it stop. She was sobbing softly into my chest now. God help me, I loved having her so close to me, even if she was upset.

"Let it out. You've had a big couple of days, but you're okay now. I promise," I said. I ran my hand slowly up and down her back, trying to calm her raw nerves from the nightmare. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

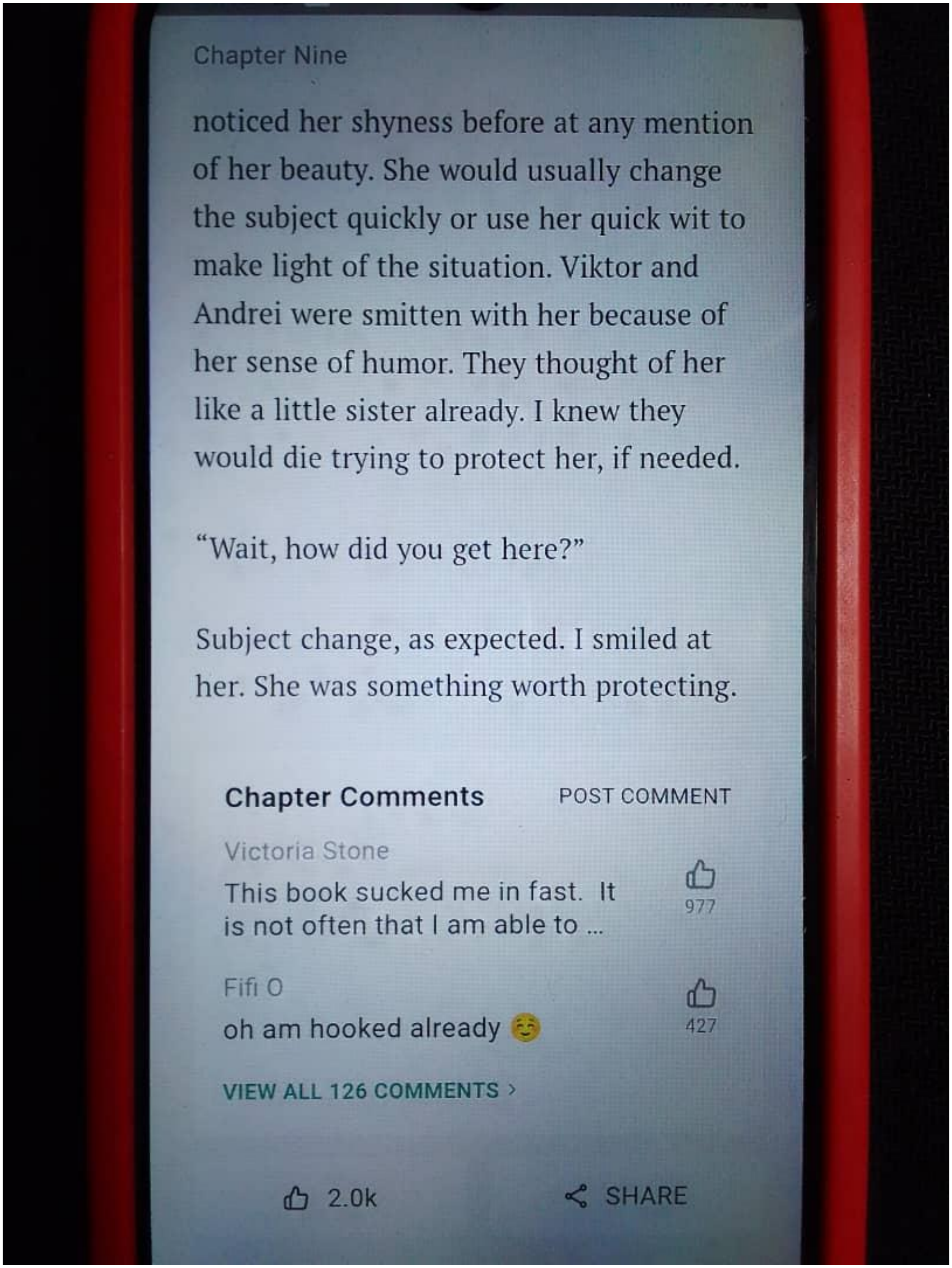
She took a breath and leaned back away from me. I instantly regretted asking her the question as it put distance between us.



She wiped tears from her face, but kept her eyes closed like she was fighting back more tears. I reached up and wiped a few stray tears from under her eyes. She finally opened her eyes. I felt like I was drowning in her beautiful eyes, and I didn't care. The dim light of her bedroom made her teary eyes sparkle, each color catching the light in its own way, making the three colors appear to dance in her eyes. My heart skipped a beat. I reached up and brushed her curls back from her face. "You're even beautiful when you cry."

She blushed and looked down at her hands. No! I needed her to look at me again. I gently raised her chin up, seeking her mesmerizing gaze once again and said, "Don't hide your beautiful eyes from me, solnishko. I could stare into your unique eyes all day and all night and never get tired of the view."

She struggled to accept my words. I



noticed her shyness before at any mention of her beauty. She would usually change the subject quickly or use her quick wit to make light of the situation. Viktor and Andrei were smitten with her because of her sense of humor. They thought of her like a little sister already. I knew they would die trying to protect her, if needed.

"Wait, how did you get here?"

Subject change, as expected. I smiled at her. She was something worth protecting.

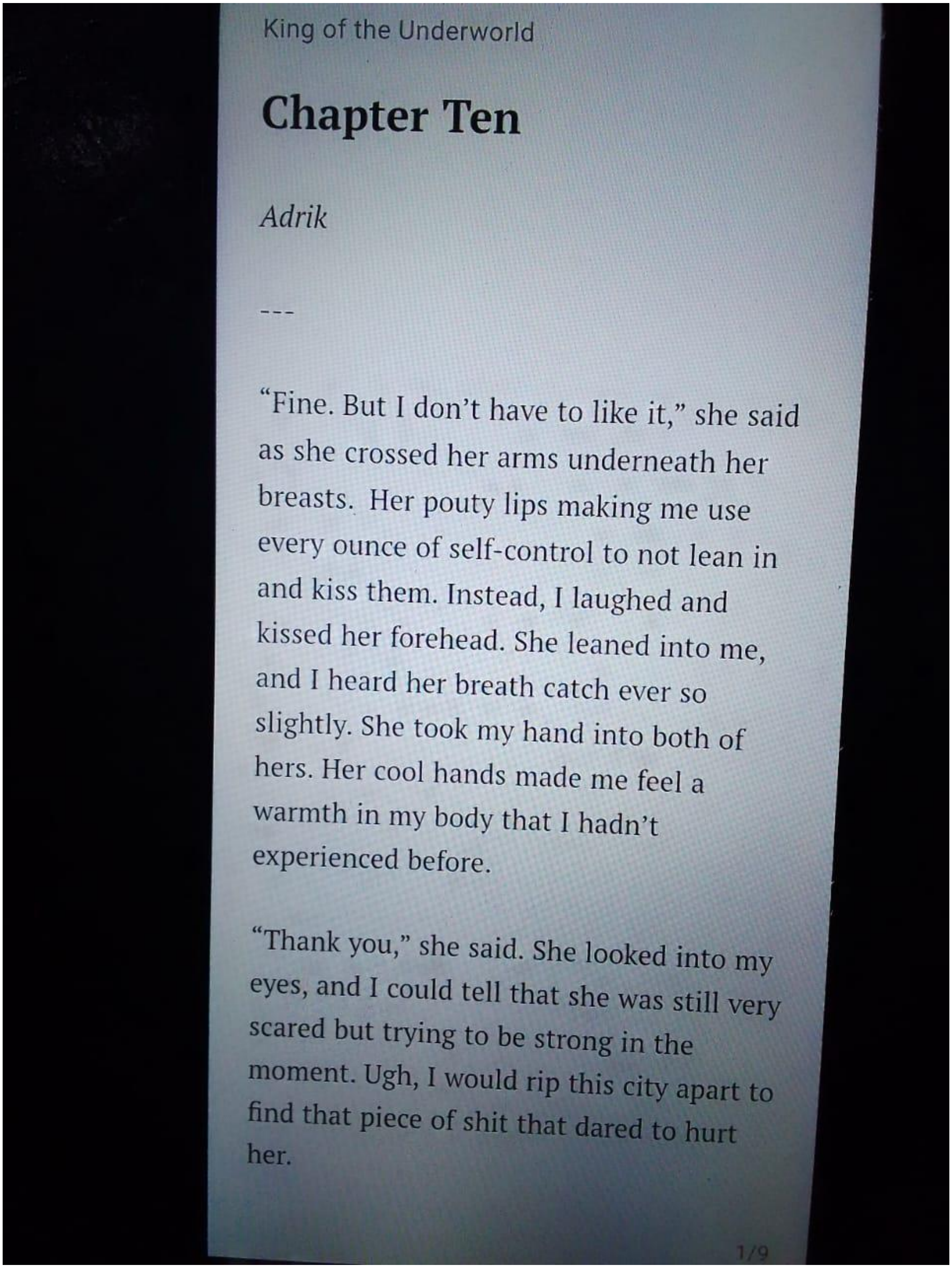
Chapter Comments

Victoria Stone

This book sucked me in fast. It is not often that I am able to ...

Fifi O

oh am hooked already ☺

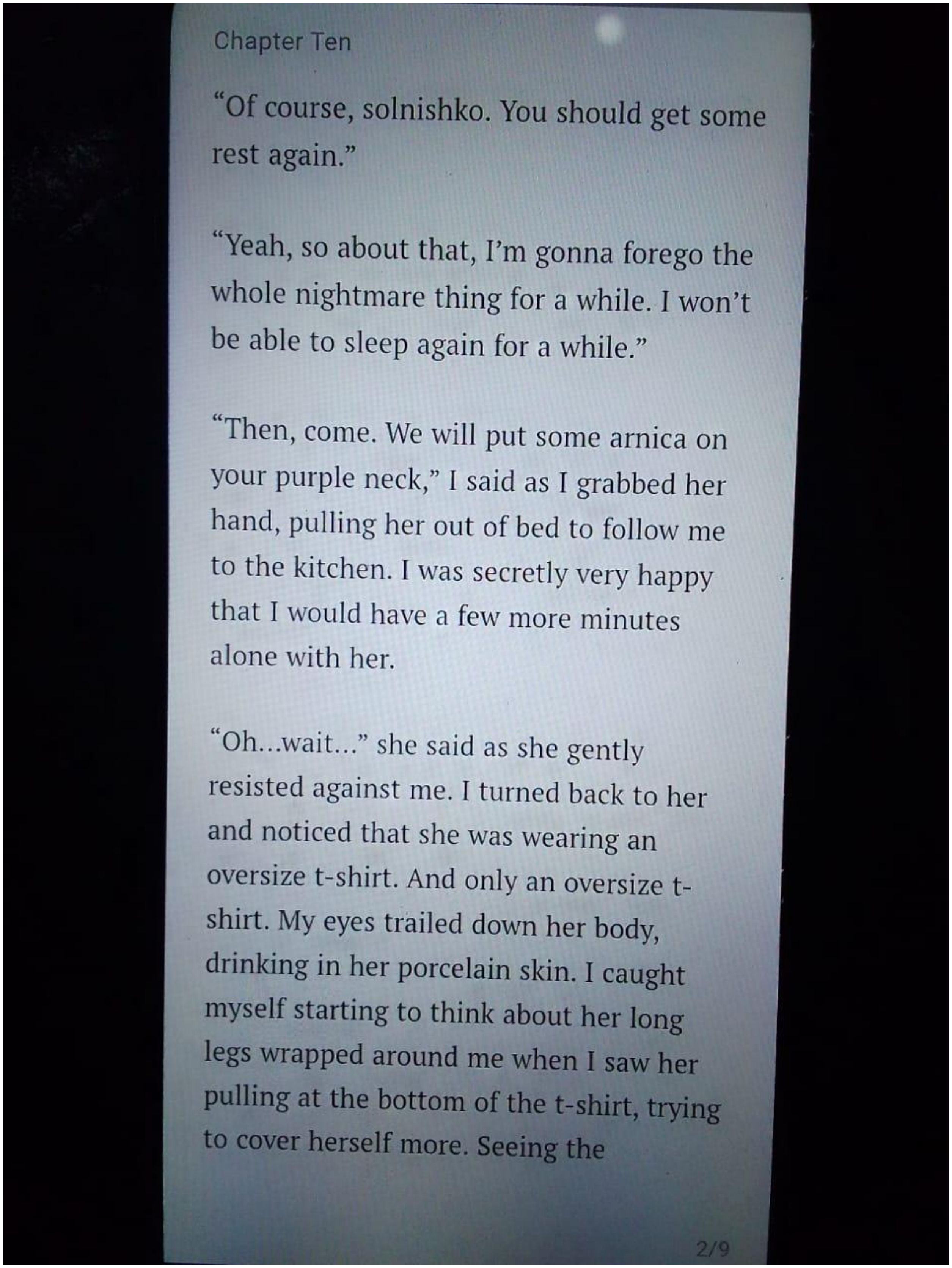


Chapter Ten

Adrik

“Fine. But I don’t have to like it,” she said as she crossed her arms underneath her breasts. Her pouty lips making me use every ounce of self-control to not lean in and kiss them. Instead, I laughed and kissed her forehead. She leaned into me, and I heard her breath catch ever so slightly. She took my hand into both of hers. Her cool hands made me feel a warmth in my body that I hadn’t experienced before.

“Thank you,” she said. She looked into my eyes, and I could tell that she was still very scared but trying to be strong in the moment. Ugh, I would rip this city apart to find that piece of shit that dared to hurt her.



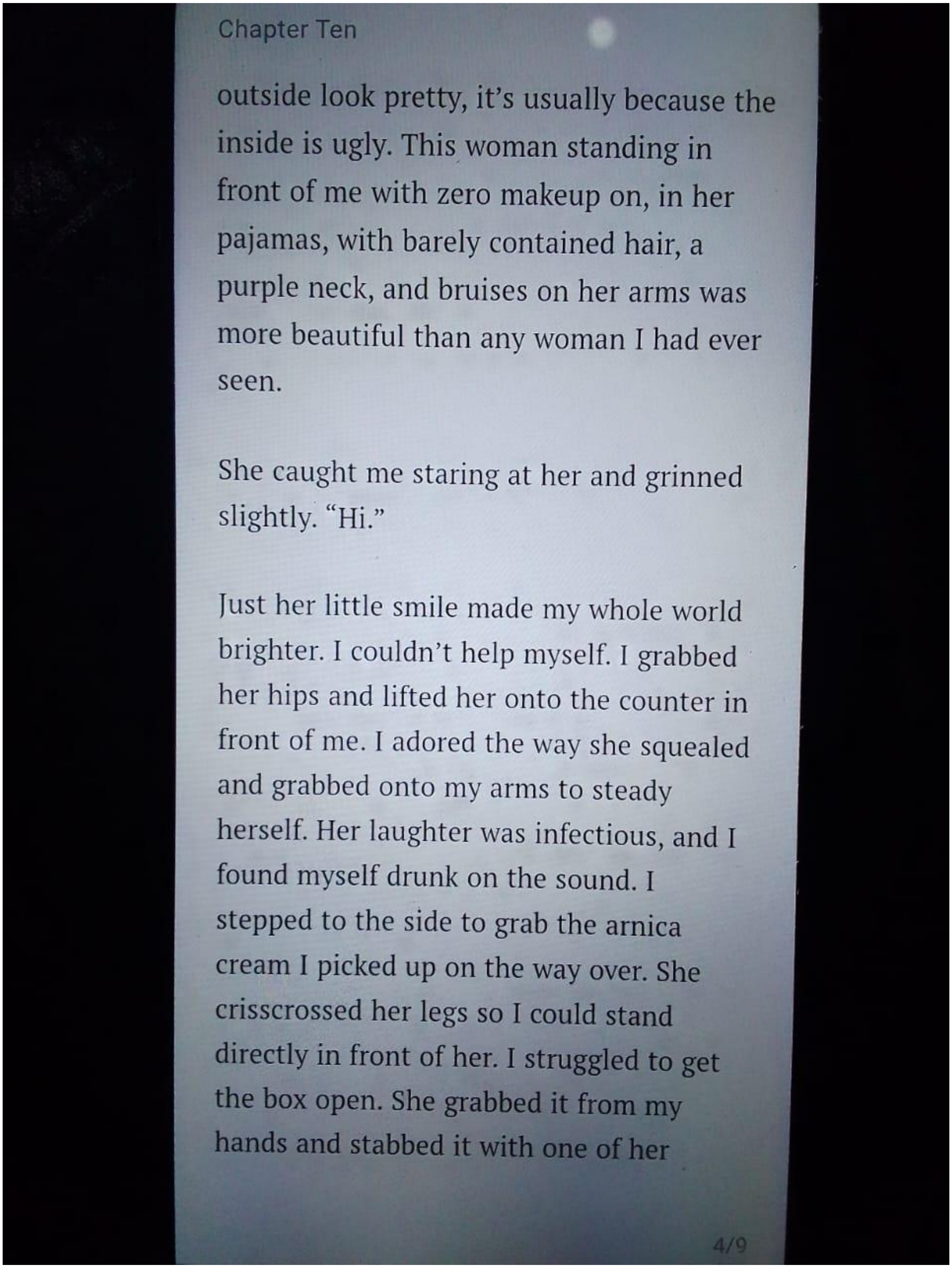
“Of course, solnishko. You should get some rest again.”

“Yeah, so about that, I’m gonna forego the whole nightmare thing for a while. I won’t be able to sleep again for a while.”

“Then, come. We will put some arnica on your purple neck,” I said as I grabbed her hand, pulling her out of bed to follow me to the kitchen. I was secretly very happy that I would have a few more minutes alone with her.

“Oh…wait…” she said as she gently resisted against me. I turned back to her and noticed that she was wearing an oversize t-shirt. And only an oversize t-shirt. My eyes trailed down her body, drinking in her porcelain skin. I caught myself starting to think about her long legs wrapped around me when I saw her pulling at the bottom of the t-shirt, trying to cover herself more. Seeing the embarrassment on her face, I kissed her forehead once more and said, “apologies. I’ll meet you in the kitchen.”

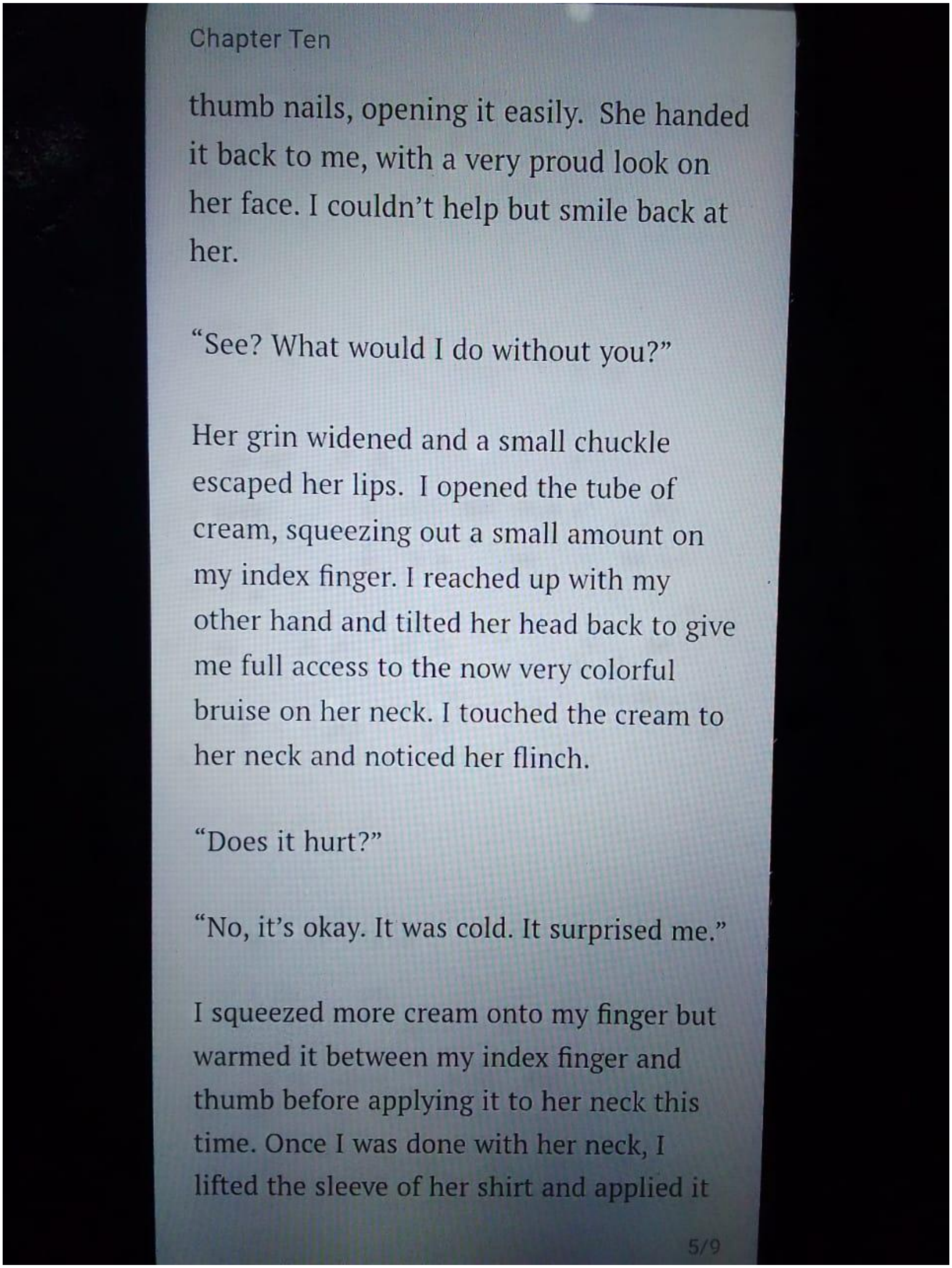
I didn’t have to wait long until she appeared in the kitchen, this time wearing a pair of leggings under her oversize shirt. As she walked in, she was pulling her long, curly hair into a ponytail. It just didn’t matter what she did, I found her absolutely stunning. The fact that she was so comfortable with me, in her home, while she just woke up and had zero makeup on, and seemingly didn’t care that she was in her pajamas was a new phenomenon for me. The women I had been with in the past were the type to look like they were about to go to a dinner party at any moment. A few of them even slept in full makeup. When I was younger, I thought it was attractive, but as I had gotten older, I found it more repulsive than anything. Beauty comes from within. When you spend so much time trying to make the



outside look pretty, it's usually because the inside is ugly. This woman standing in front of me with zero makeup on, in her pajamas, with barely contained hair, a purple neck, and bruises on her arms was more beautiful than any woman I had ever seen.

She caught me staring at her and grinned slightly. "Hi."

Just her little smile made my whole world brighter. I couldn't help myself. I grabbed her hips and lifted her onto the counter in front of me. I adored the way she squealed and grabbed onto my arms to steady herself. Her laughter was infectious, and I found myself drunk on the sound. I stepped to the side to grab the arnica cream I picked up on the way over. She crisscrossed her legs so I could stand directly in front of her. I struggled to get the box open. She grabbed it from my hands and stabbed it with one of her



thumb nails, opening it easily. She handed it back to me, with a very proud look on her face. I couldn't help but smile back at her.

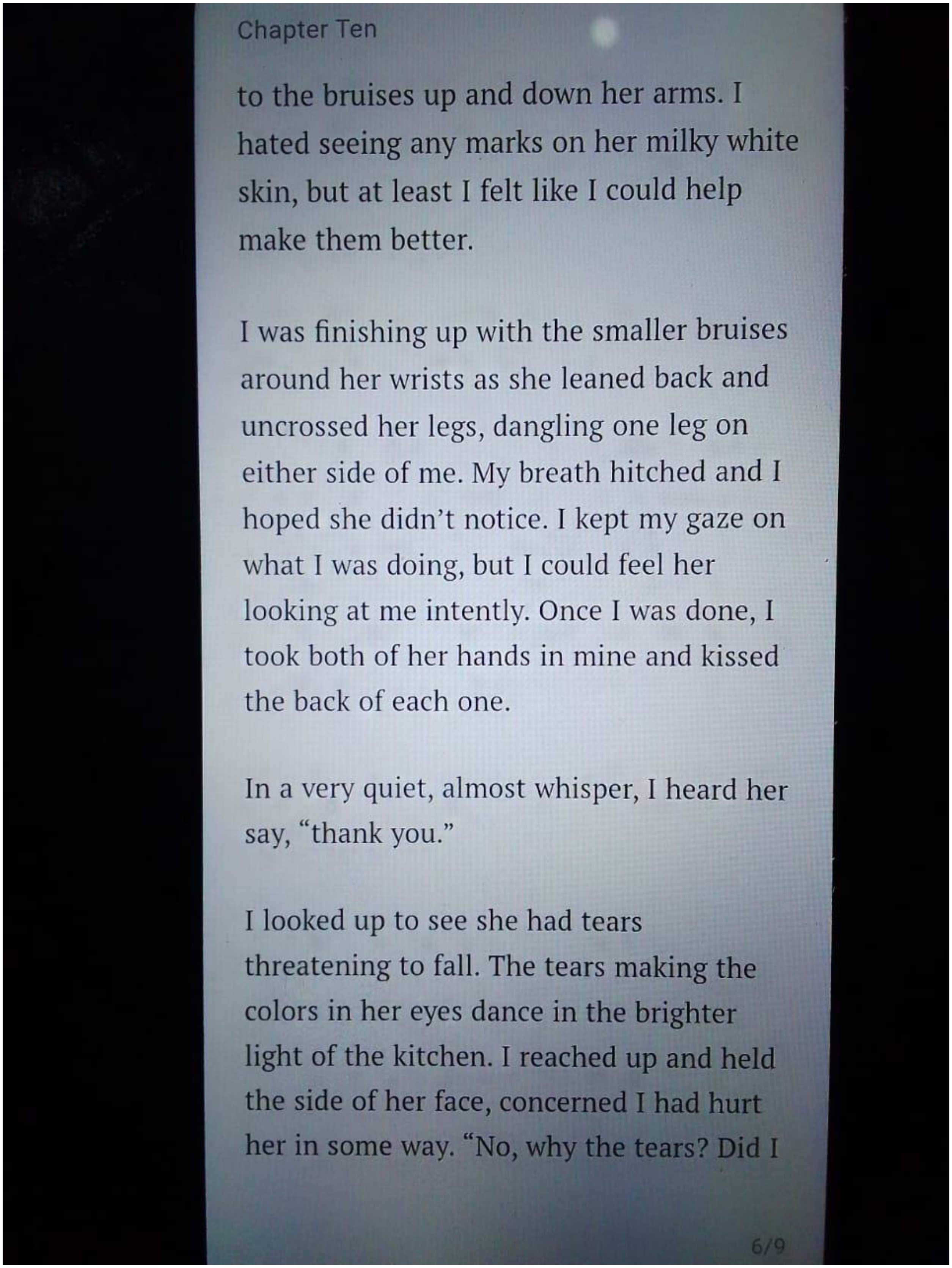
"See? What would I do without you?"

Her grin widened and a small chuckle escaped her lips. I opened the tube of cream, squeezing out a small amount on my index finger. I reached up with my other hand and tilted her head back to give me full access to the now very colorful bruise on her neck. I touched the cream to her neck and noticed her flinch.

"Does it hurt?"

"No, it's okay. It was cold. It surprised me."

I squeezed more cream onto my finger but warmed it between my index finger and thumb before applying it to her neck this time. Once I was done with her neck, I lifted the sleeve of her shirt and applied it

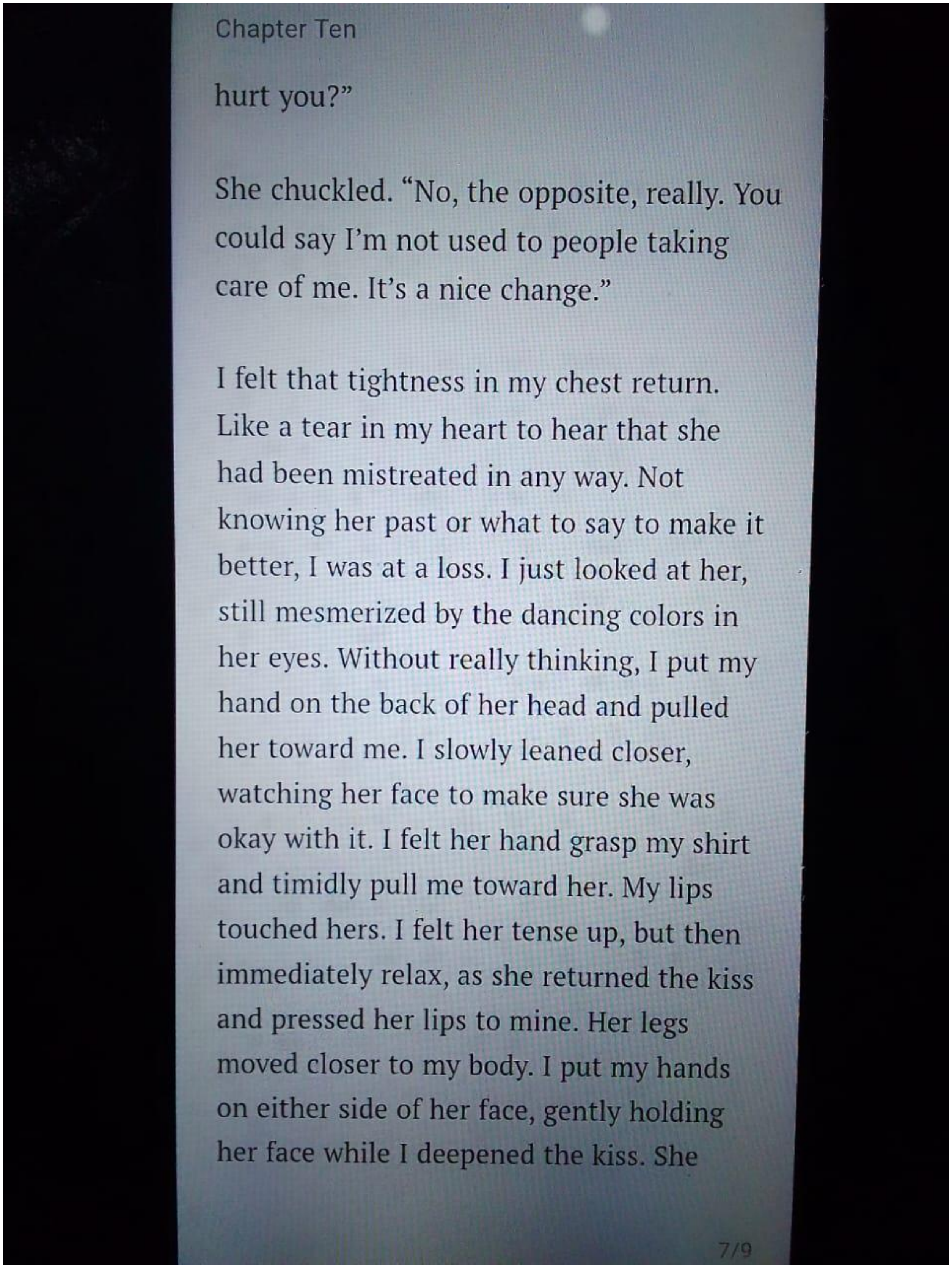


to the bruises up and down her arms. I hated seeing any marks on her milky white skin, but at least I felt like I could help make them better.

I was finishing up with the smaller bruises around her wrists as she leaned back and uncrossed her legs, dangling one leg on either side of me. My breath hitched and I hoped she didn’t notice. I kept my gaze on what I was doing, but I could feel her looking at me intently. Once I was done, I took both of her hands in mine and kissed the back of each one.

In a very quiet, almost whisper, I heard her say, “thank you.”

I looked up to see she had tears threatening to fall. The tears making the colors in her eyes dance in the brighter light of the kitchen. I reached up and held the side of her face, concerned I had hurt her in some way. “No, why the tears? Did I

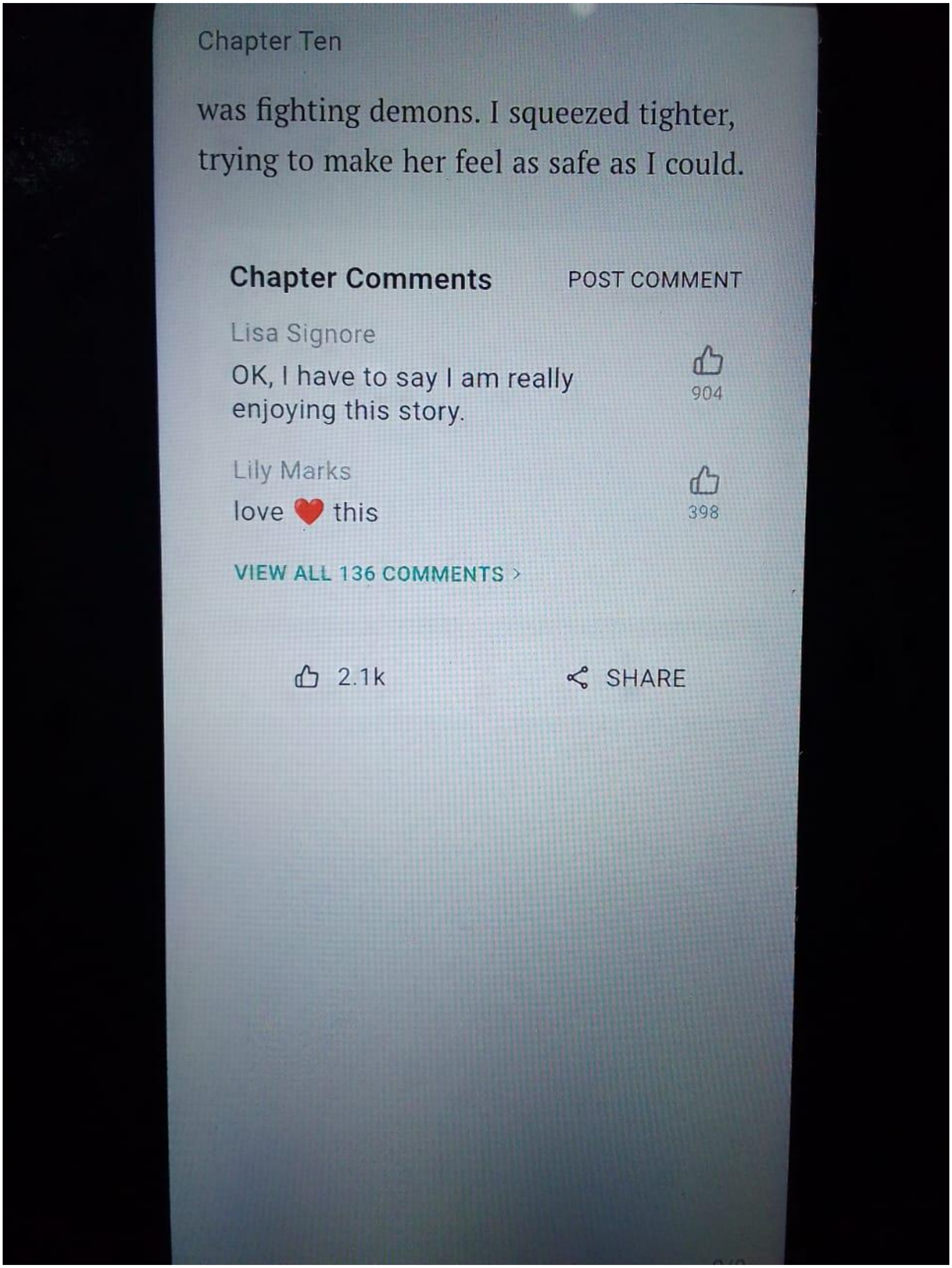


hurt you?"

She chuckled. "No, the opposite, really. You could say I'm not used to people taking care of me. It's a nice change."

I felt that tightness in my chest return. Like a tear in my heart to hear that she had been mistreated in any way. Not knowing her past or what to say to make it better, I was at a loss. I just looked at her, still mesmerized by the dancing colors in her eyes. Without really thinking, I put my hand on the back of her head and pulled her toward me. I slowly leaned closer, watching her face to make sure she was okay with it. I felt her hand grasp my shirt and timidly pull me toward her. My lips touched hers. I felt her tense up, but then immediately relax, as she returned the kiss and pressed her lips to mine. Her legs moved closer to my body. I put my hands on either side of her face, gently holding her face while I deepened the kiss. She responded by parting her lips, allowing me access. It took all the self-control I had not to just devour her right then and there. She wrapped her arms around my neck, and I moved my hands down her body to her hips, scooting her closer to me. She squealed against my lips as she felt me pull her closer and instinctively wrapped her legs around my torso. I groaned as I deepened the kiss even more, tasting every inch of her mouth with my tongue. After a few moments, she pulled back slightly, looking into my eyes and over my face. She brought her hands to my face and lightly traced the features of my face. I closed my eyes, reveling in her light touch.

I felt her press her forehead to mine. I opened my eyes briefly. She was resting her forehead against mine, her eyes closed. I felt her inhale and a small sigh escaped her lips. I wrapped my arms around her waist and held her against me. I could feel the faint shaking in her legs and knew she



Chapter Ten

was fighting demons. I squeezed tighter, trying to make her feel as safe as I could.

Chapter Comments POST COMMENT

Lisa Signore

OK, I have to say I am really enjoying this story. 👍 904

Lily Marks

love ❤️ this 👍 398

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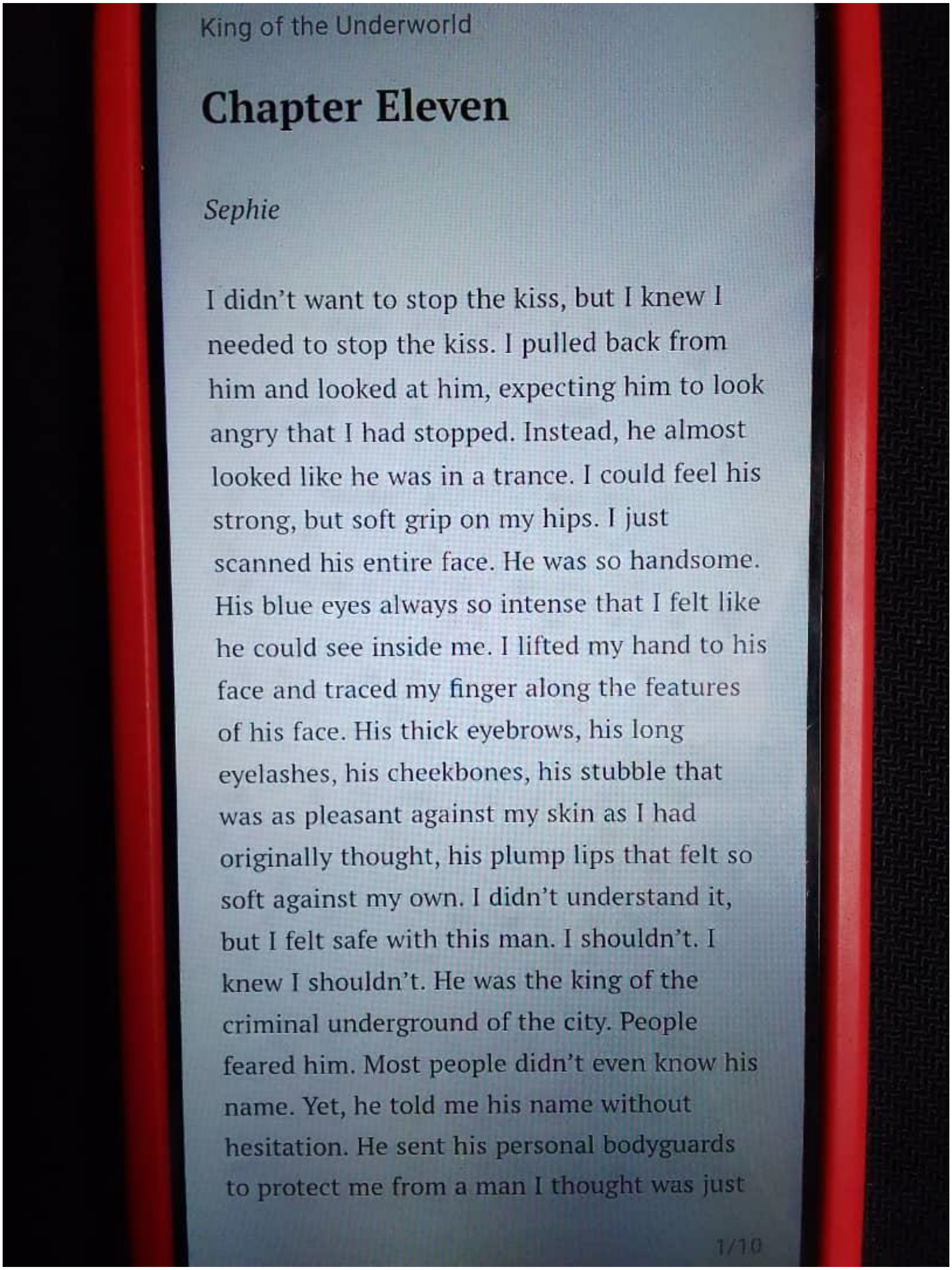
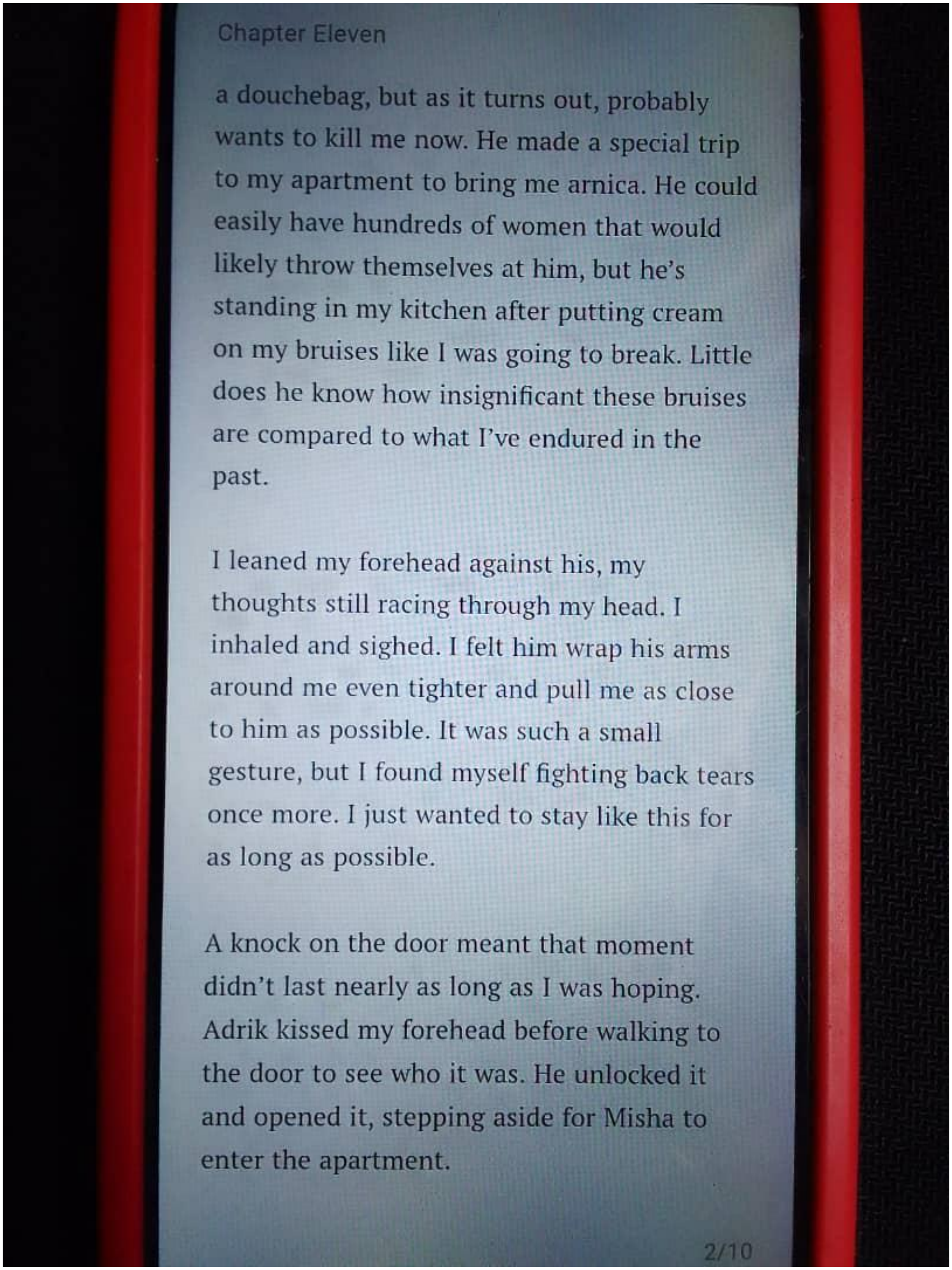


Chapter Eleven

Sephie

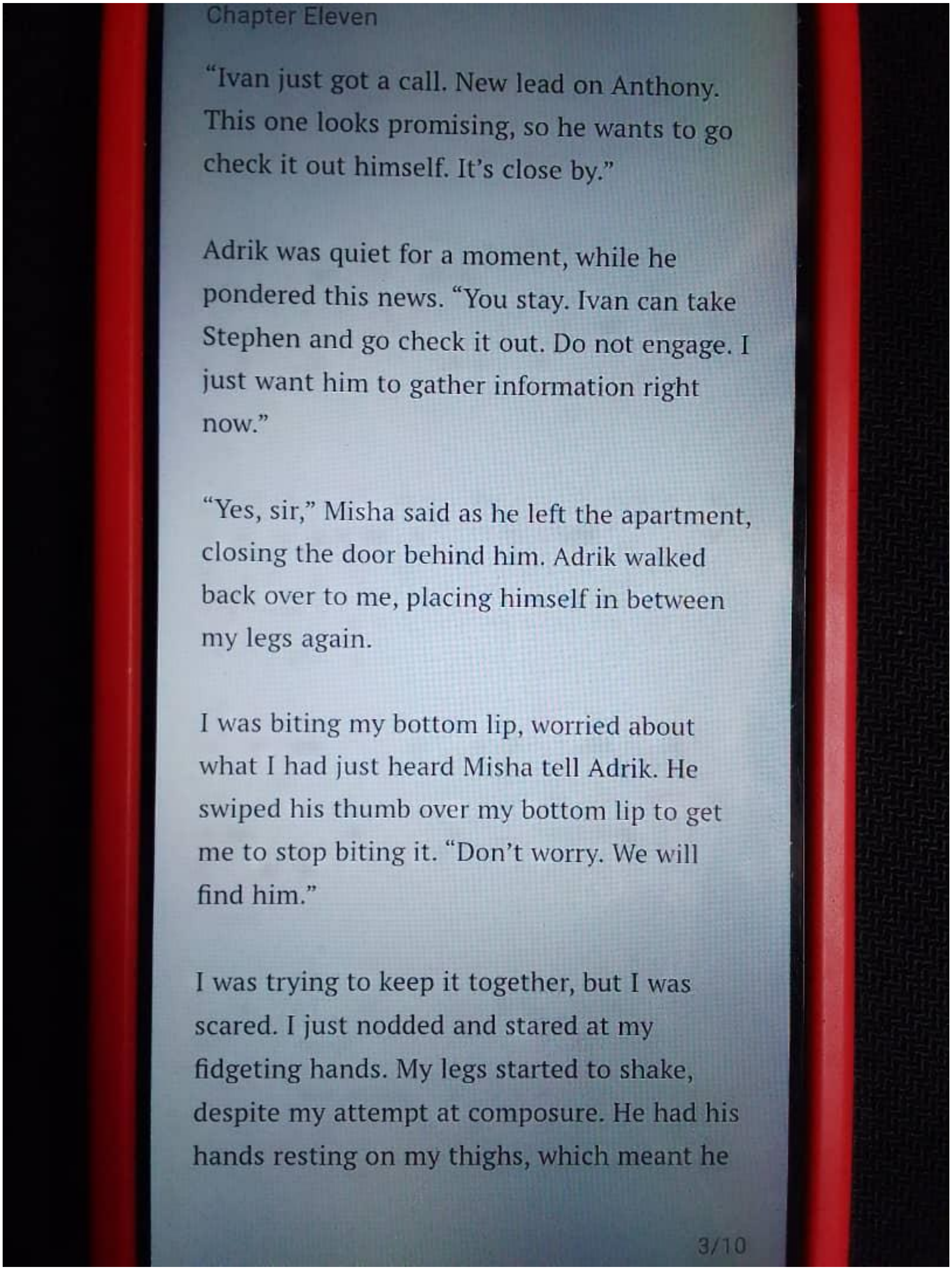
I didn't want to stop the kiss, but I knew I needed to stop the kiss. I pulled back from him and looked at him, expecting him to look angry that I had stopped. Instead, he almost looked like he was in a trance. I could feel his strong, but soft grip on my hips. I just scanned his entire face. He was so handsome. His blue eyes always so intense that I felt like he could see inside me. I lifted my hand to his face and traced my finger along the features of his face. His thick eyebrows, his long eyelashes, his cheekbones, his stubble that was as pleasant against my skin as I had originally thought, his plump lips that felt so soft against my own. I didn't understand it, but I felt safe with this man. I shouldn't. I knew I shouldn't. He was the king of the criminal underground of the city. People feared him. Most people didn't even know his name. Yet, he told me his name without hesitation. He sent his personal bodyguards to protect me from a man I thought was just



a douchebag, but as it turns out, probably wants to kill me now. He made a special trip to my apartment to bring me arnica. He could easily have hundreds of women that would likely throw themselves at him, but he's standing in my kitchen after putting cream on my bruises like I was going to break. Little does he know how insignificant these bruises are compared to what I've endured in the past.

I leaned my forehead against his, my thoughts still racing through my head. I inhaled and sighed. I felt him wrap his arms around me even tighter and pull me as close to him as possible. It was such a small gesture, but I found myself fighting back tears once more. I just wanted to stay like this for as long as possible.

A knock on the door meant that moment didn't last nearly as long as I was hoping. Adrik kissed my forehead before walking to the door to see who it was. He unlocked it and opened it, stepping aside for Misha to enter the apartment.



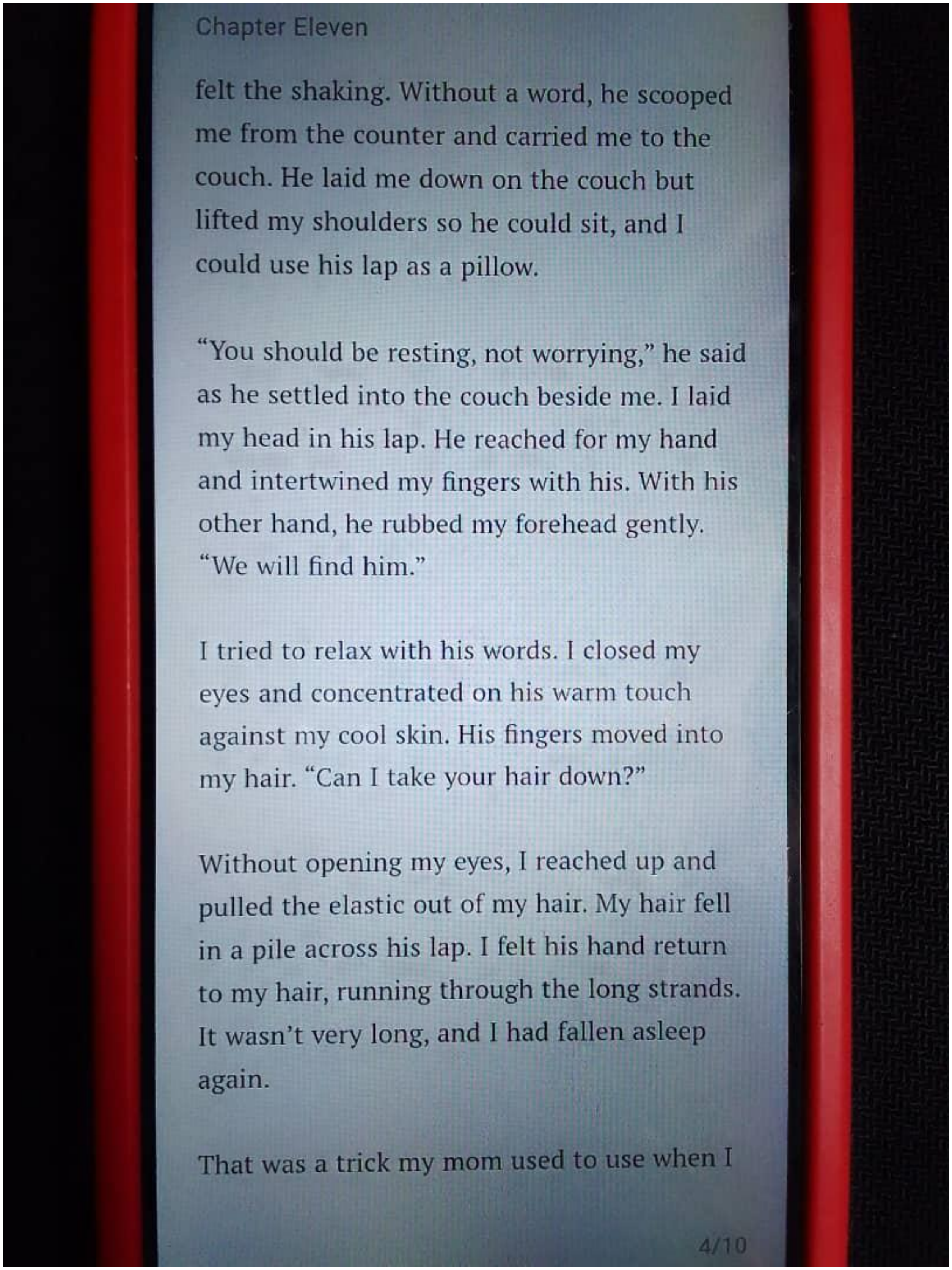
"Ivan just got a call. New lead on Anthony. This one looks promising, so he wants to go check it out himself. It's close by."

Adrik was quiet for a moment, while he pondered this news. "You stay. Ivan can take Stephen and go check it out. Do not engage. I just want him to gather information right now."

"Yes, sir," Misha said as he left the apartment, closing the door behind him. Adrik walked back over to me, placing himself in between my legs again.

I was biting my bottom lip, worried about what I had just heard Misha tell Adrik. He swiped his thumb over my bottom lip to get me to stop biting it. "Don't worry. We will find him."

I was trying to keep it together, but I was scared. I just nodded and stared at my fidgeting hands. My legs started to shake, despite my attempt at composure. He had his hands resting on my thighs, which meant he



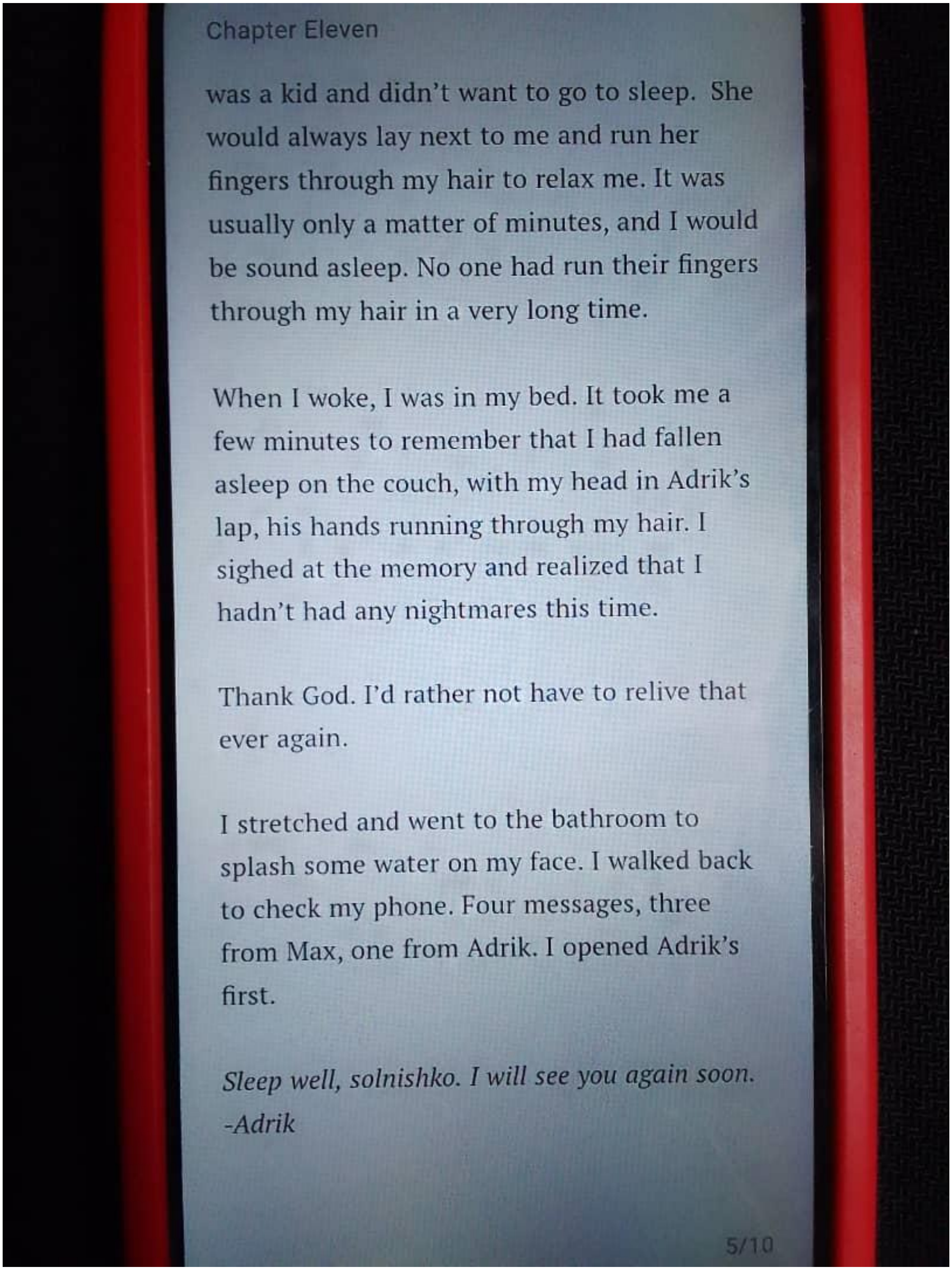
felt the shaking. Without a word, he scooped me from the counter and carried me to the couch. He laid me down on the couch but lifted my shoulders so he could sit, and I could use his lap as a pillow.

"You should be resting, not worrying," he said as he settled into the couch beside me. I laid my head in his lap. He reached for my hand and intertwined my fingers with his. With his other hand, he rubbed my forehead gently. "We will find him."

I tried to relax with his words. I closed my eyes and concentrated on his warm touch against my cool skin. His fingers moved into my hair. "Can I take your hair down?"

Without opening my eyes, I reached up and pulled the elastic out of my hair. My hair fell in a pile across his lap. I felt his hand return to my hair, running through the long strands. It wasn't very long, and I had fallen asleep again.

That was a trick my mom used to use when I



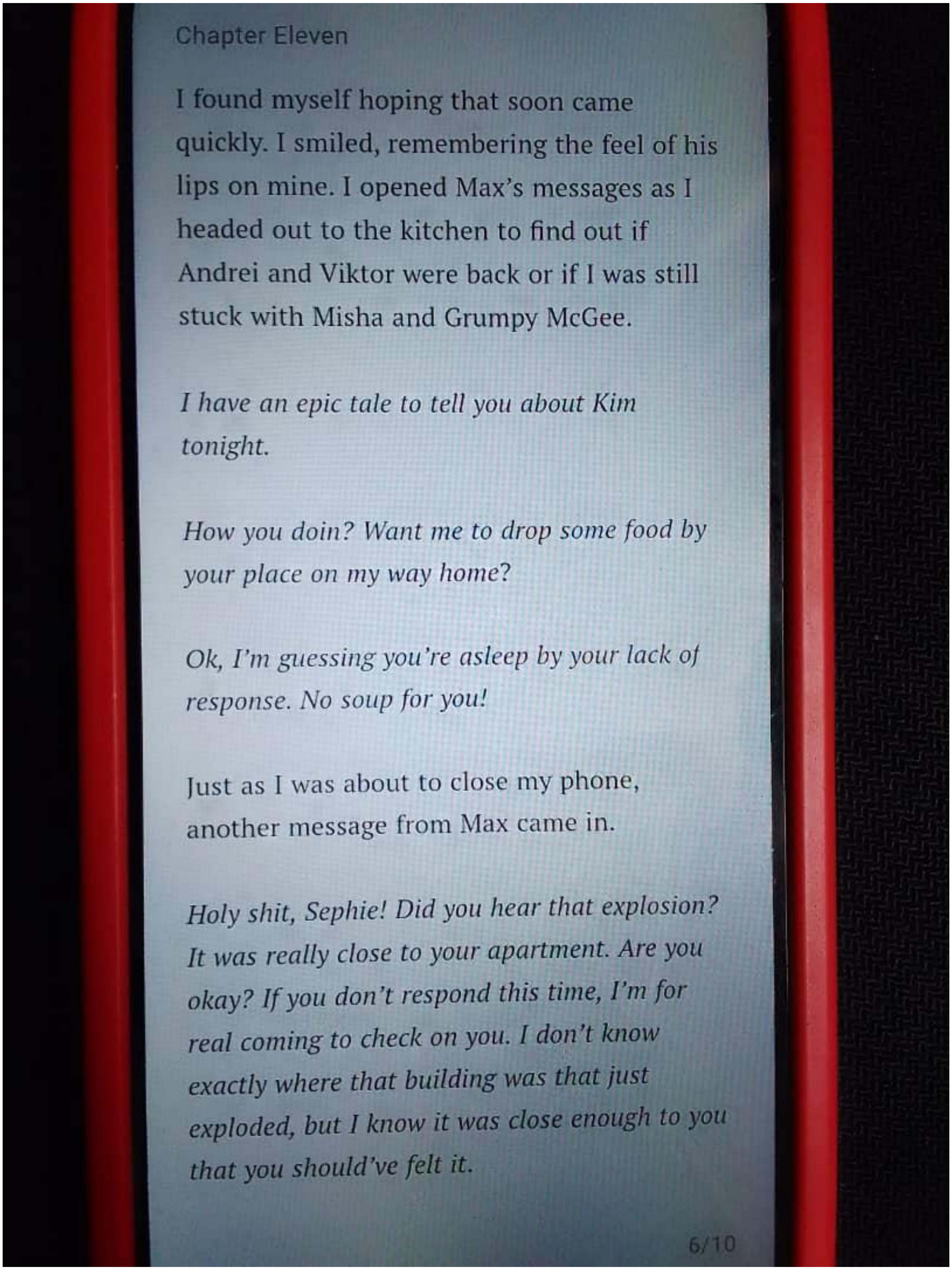
was a kid and didn't want to go to sleep. She would always lay next to me and run her fingers through my hair to relax me. It was usually only a matter of minutes, and I would be sound asleep. No one had run their fingers through my hair in a very long time.

When I woke, I was in my bed. It took me a few minutes to remember that I had fallen asleep on the couch, with my head in Adrik's lap, his hands running through my hair. I sighed at the memory and realized that I hadn't had any nightmares this time.

Thank God. I'd rather not have to relive that ever again.

I stretched and went to the bathroom to splash some water on my face. I walked back to check my phone. Four messages, three from Max, one from Adrik. I opened Adrik's first.

Sleep well, solnishko. I will see you again soon.
-Adrik



I found myself hoping that soon came quickly. I smiled, remembering the feel of his lips on mine. I opened Max's messages as I headed out to the kitchen to find out if Andrei and Viktor were back or if I was still stuck with Misha and Grumpy McGee.

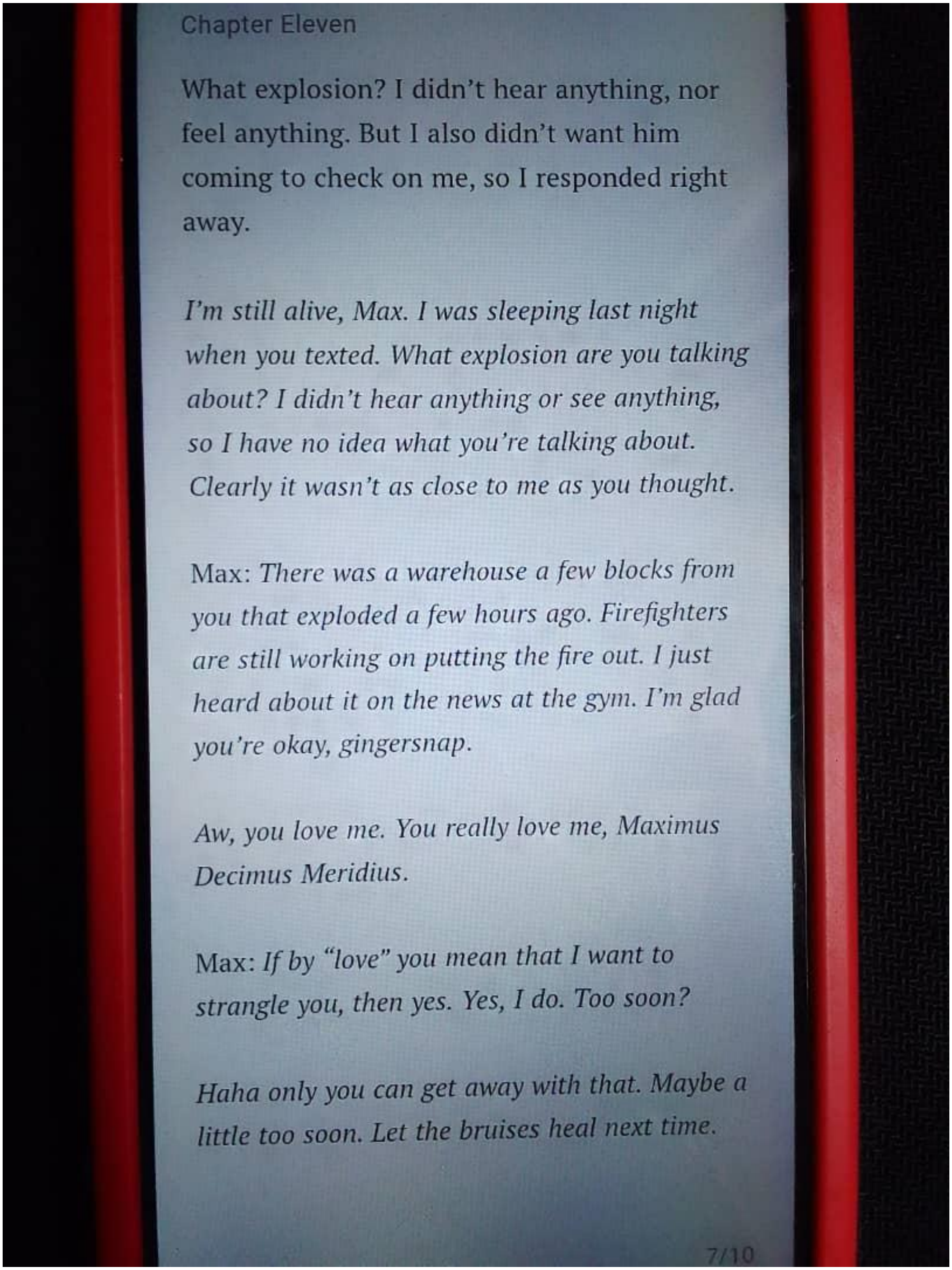
I have an epic tale to tell you about Kim tonight.

How you doin? Want me to drop some food by your place on my way home?

Ok, I'm guessing you're asleep by your lack of response. No soup for you!

Just as I was about to close my phone, another message from Max came in.

Holy shit, Sephie! Did you hear that explosion? It was really close to your apartment. Are you okay? If you don't respond this time, I'm for real coming to check on you. I don't know exactly where that building was that just exploded, but I know it was close enough to you that you should've felt it.



What explosion? I didn't hear anything, nor feel anything. But I also didn't want him coming to check on me, so I responded right away.

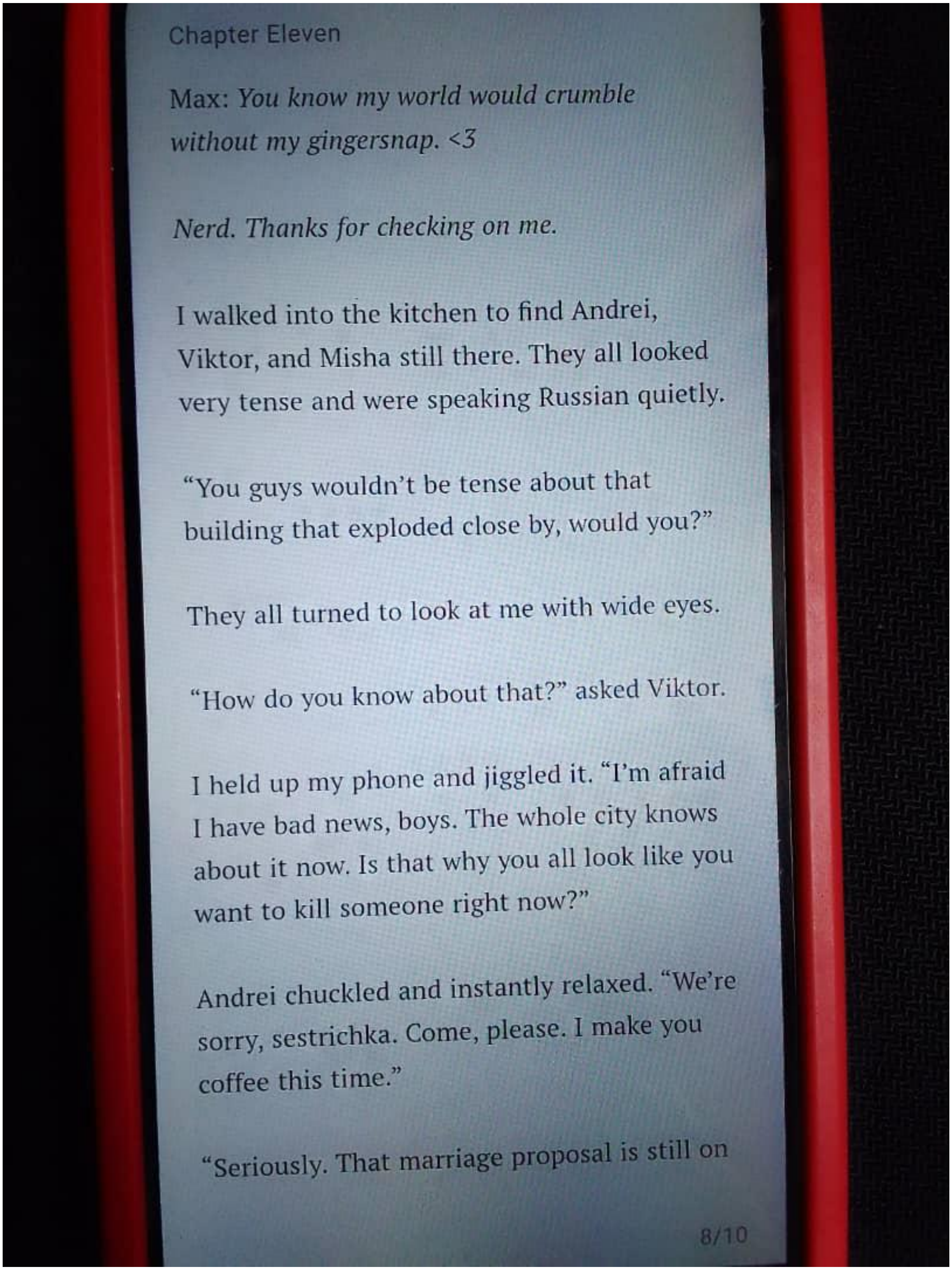
I'm still alive, Max. I was sleeping last night when you texted. What explosion are you talking about? I didn't hear anything or see anything, so I have no idea what you're talking about. Clearly it wasn't as close to me as you thought.

Max: *There was a warehouse a few blocks from you that exploded a few hours ago. Firefighters are still working on putting the fire out. I just heard about it on the news at the gym. I'm glad you're okay, gingersnap.*

Aw, you love me. You really love me, Maximus Decimus Meridius.

Max: *If by "love" you mean that I want to strangle you, then yes. Yes, I do. Too soon?*

Haha only you can get away with that. Maybe a little too soon. Let the bruises heal next time.



Max: *You know my world would crumble without my gingersnap. <3*

Nerd. Thanks for checking on me.

I walked into the kitchen to find Andrei, Viktor, and Misha still there. They all looked very tense and were speaking Russian quietly.

"You guys wouldn't be tense about that building that exploded close by, would you?"

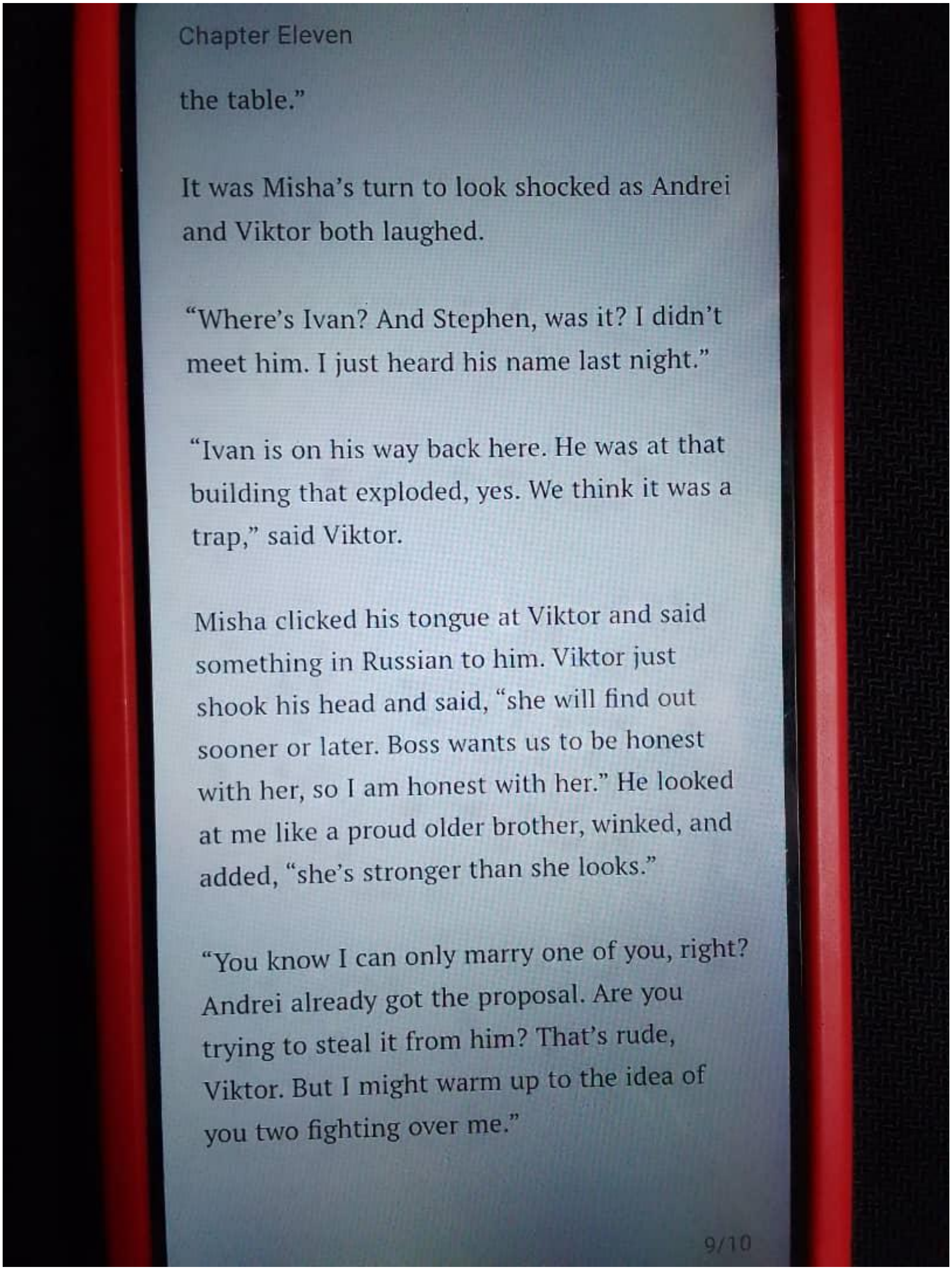
They all turned to look at me with wide eyes.

"How do you know about that?" asked Viktor.

I held up my phone and jiggled it. "I'm afraid I have bad news, boys. The whole city knows about it now. Is that why you all look like you want to kill someone right now?"

Andrei chuckled and instantly relaxed. "We're sorry, sestrichka. Come, please. I make you coffee this time."

"Seriously. That marriage proposal is still on



the table."

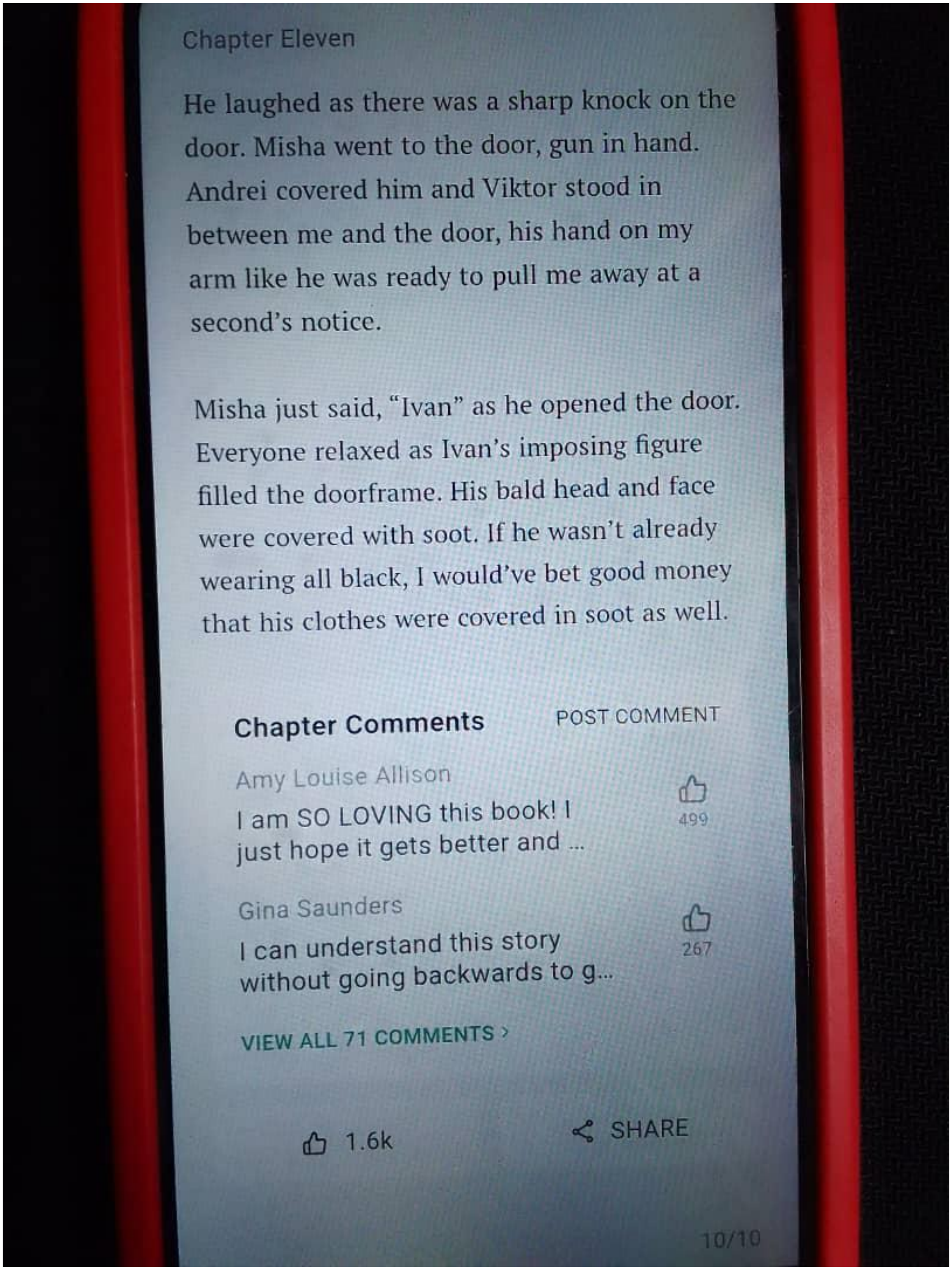
It was Misha's turn to look shocked as Andrei and Viktor both laughed.

"Where's Ivan? And Stephen, was it? I didn't meet him. I just heard his name last night."

"Ivan is on his way back here. He was at that building that exploded, yes. We think it was a trap," said Viktor.

Misha clicked his tongue at Viktor and said something in Russian to him. Viktor just shook his head and said, "she will find out sooner or later. Boss wants us to be honest with her, so I am honest with her." He looked at me like a proud older brother, winked, and added, "she's stronger than she looks."

"You know I can only marry one of you, right? Andrei already got the proposal. Are you trying to steal it from him? That's rude, Viktor. But I might warm up to the idea of you two fighting over me."



Chapter Eleven

He laughed as there was a sharp knock on the door. Misha went to the door, gun in hand. Andrei covered him and Viktor stood in between me and the door, his hand on my arm like he was ready to pull me away at a second's notice.

Misha just said, "Ivan" as he opened the door. Everyone relaxed as Ivan's imposing figure filled the doorframe. His bald head and face were covered with soot. If he wasn't already wearing all black, I would've bet good money that his clothes were covered in soot as well.

Chapter Comments

Amy Louise Allison 499
I am SO LOVING this book! I just hope it gets better and ...

Gina Saunders 267
I can understand this story without going backwards to g...

Chapter Twelve

Sephie

“Well, you look like you’ve had an exciting morning,” I said.

Ivan walked into the kitchen, eyebrow raised, and his intense gaze burning holes in my soul as usual.

“I see your brush with death didn’t help you develop a sense of humor,” I mumbled under my breath.

Viktor and Andrei both choked back laughter, as they had both heard me.

Misha broke the tension in the room by asking Ivan what happened. He started to respond in Russian, but Misha stopped him.

“Net. In English,” he said, motioning toward me. Ivan once again raised an eyebrow and stared at me but, nonetheless, continued his explanation in English.

“I got tip that Anthony was at a warehouse 3 miles from here. Too close, so I wanted to check it out myself. We get bad information always right now on where that little f*cker is. If information is bad this time, I take it out on my source.”

While Ivan was talking, Andrei was making coffee for everyone. He sat a coffee cup down in front of me and I signed “thank you” to him. He winked and went about giving everyone else their coffee.

Ivan continued, “when we got to the warehouse, there was activity, but not enough that I suspected Anthony was there. At least not at that moment. There was maybe 10 guys there. I sent Stephen back here to take Boss home. I wanted a closer look, so I moved my position. I was 25 yards from warehouse doors, watching. Trucks come in, men unload, trucks leave. Everything was quiet for maybe an hour, then boom.”

“Holy shit,” I said, under my breath. “Are you okay?”

Ivan looked at me, somewhat surprised. It was like he wasn’t used to people inquiring about his well-being, and he didn’t know what to say. He nodded his head, saying “da” as he took his jacket off. When he turned his back to hang his jacket by the door, we all noticed a huge gash on the back of his shoulder.

“Your definition of fine and mine are clearly different,” I said. Misha went to inspect the gash.

“Looks bad, you might need stitches,” Misha told Ivan.

“Net. No hospital.”

“At least let me clean it up for you so it won’t get infected. I should have bandages that can cover it,” I said standing up from the barstool to go take a closer look at his injury. I quickly went to my bathroom and came back with a well- stocked first aid kit. They all raised their eyebrows when they saw my medical supplies.

“What? I’m clumsy. I get hurt a lot.”

I looked at Ivan and motioned to him, “come here. Take your shirt off.”

He stayed where he was, without moving for a few seconds. Like he was torn between following my orders and not allowing me to help him.

“Or you can be stubborn and not let me help, in which case that gash gets infected, and you end up useless to anyone because you’re laying in bed with a fever for days, maybe weeks.”

Misha chuckled and kicked Ivan in the butt, effectively making him take a few steps toward me.

“I like her. She’s feisty,” Misha said.

Ivan mumbled something in Russian, under his breath, but still stood in front of me and pulled his shirt over his head. His entire upper body was covered in tattoos. I glanced at them as he took his shirt off but tried not to stare. He looked at me with his intense gaze and turned around. The gash looked even worse without his shirt.

“Oh boy.” I said. “Misha was right. You might really need stitches.”

“Net. No hospitals,” he said as he turned around to face me again. He towered over me and leaned down to add.

“unless you can do it, princess.”

I held his intense gaze and fired back, “actually, I can stitch it up, as*hole. It just isn’t going to look as pretty as what you’ll get if a doctor does it. And I have nothing to numb the area, so it’s gonna hurt like a son of a b*tch, which I will enjoy, but you will not.”

The other three men couldn’t contain their laughter this time and all three started laughing quietly at our exchange.

“Do it,” was all Ivan said as he turned around again. I looked to Viktor, who simply nodded his head. Hopping up on the cabinet so I could better reach his shoulder, I started to clean the wound.

When I got to the antiseptic, I said, “this is definitely going to burn. Please don’t murder me.”

Ivan simply grunted. His arms were crossed on his sizeable chest. When I put the antiseptic on his gash, he didn’t move a muscle. He showed no signs of discomfort. I knew he was tough, but that’s seriously impressive. Antiseptic on open wounds usually feels like you’re being burned by battery acid.

When I got everything as clean and disinfected as possible, I hesitated to start the stitches. “This is going to hurt. I don’t have anything to numb the area. I might have some whiskey in the cabinet. Do you want that? It’ll take the edge off, anyway.”

“Where,” he asked. I pointed over his shoulder to the cabinet the whiskey was in. He grabbed the bottle and downed a sizeable amount in one gulp.

I looked at him, my eyebrow raised, “maybe you should drink more. I’d like to stay alive in this process. You’re a big dude. I’m guessing that wasn’t enough.”

Without a word, he swallowed almost half the bottle. When he was done, he stood in front of me again and said, “do it.”

I stitched him up as best I could. It was not pretty, but it would heal better than if he had no stitches at all. After I was done ensuring he would have a b*dass scar from this experience, I bandaged the area to protect the stitches.

“All done. Sorry I don’t have a lollipop or anything to give you for being a good boy. But I do appreciate you not murdering this princess in that process.”

Finally. It happened. He laughed. It was small, but I heard it. When he turned to look at me, he had a small twinkle in his eye instead of looking like he was burning holes in my soul. Apparently, whiskey was the key to this man’s softer side.

Chapter Thirteen

Sephie

Misha ran to one of the SUV’s outside to get Ivan a new shirt, since the one he was wearing was basically ruined. Viktor received a phone call, which he took in Russian. Once he ended the call, he said, “Boss is on his way here.” He Hooked at me and said, “you get dressed. We’re leaving once he gets here.”

“We’re leaving? Where are we going?”

“Somewhere safer. Explosion was too close. I don’t like.”

“But I can’t leave. I have to take Ms. Jackson to the grocery store this afternoon. I always take her shopping on Saturdays. Without me, she has no way to get to the store, which means she has no way to eat.”

Viktor frowned at this news. He pondered on a solution for a moment, but just said, “get dressed anyway. We will work it out.”

I left my first aid kit on the cabinet and went to my bedroom for a quick shower before Adrik got there. I put slightly more effort into my appearance than what he saw the night before, but it still didn’t amount to much. No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn’t get the hang of makeup. I had people tell me when I was younger that I needed to wear makeup to cover up my freckles. I didn’t like the way it felt though. I always felt like my face was being slowly smothered when I wore it. So, I opted for mascara and the slightest bit of eye makeup. That’s as fancy as I got.

Throwing on a pair of black skinny jeans and a white blouse with a camisole underneath, I looked at my somewhat out of control hair. It was still wet from the shower, but I could tell it was going to be one of those days where it did whatever it wanted instead of what I wanted. I shrugged my shoulders, knowing this was not a fight I was going to win easily. I scrunched some product into my curls to help tame the frizz and called it a day. At least having my hair down would help cover my purple neck.

When I came out of my room, only Andrei and Viktor were in my apartment.

“Where did Misha and Ivan go?”

“Outside. Keep an eye on the perimeter,” Andrei said. “We noticed strange cars and people going into bottom apartment.”

“The one across from Ms. Jackson?” He nodded. “That’s Chen. He sells drugs. Those are just his customers. Chen gets a fresh batch on Friday, so his customers come on Saturdays.”

Andrei and Viktor both looked unhappy at this news. Andrei looked at me and said, “we’re definitely leaving. Why didn’t you tell us this sooner?”

“I can’t leave without making sure Ms. Jackson is taken care of for the week. Mr. Turner is at work and Chen isn’t reliable, obviously. And I didn’t think it was important. Chen’s apartment is quiet, except on the weekends. He’s always very respectful to everyone. I don’t even think he lives here most of the week. He just uses the apartment to sell out

of.”

Andrei and Viktor exchanged a look. Viktor spoke, “I don’t like this, sestrichka.”

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A knock on the door interrupted our conversation. Viktor went to the door, gun in hand, while Andrei stood in front of me, protectively.

“Boss,” Viktor said as he opened the door. Adrik walked into the apartment, his eyes searching until they landed on me. He stopped in his tracks and just stared for a moment before he walked to me. He put his arm around my waist, pulled me close and kissed my cheek. I leaned into his embrace, filling my lungs with his intoxicating cologne.

“How did you sleep, solnishko?”

“Very well, thank you.”

He put his hand under my chin, inspecting my bruise. “Still too dark. Did you put more arnica on this morning?”

I nodded my head, suddenly feeling shy that Andrei, Viktor, and now Stephen were also in the room.

“Good girl,” he said as he kissed my forehead. “Now, tell me. What is this about taking your neighbor to the store?”

“I take Ms. Jackson, downstairs, to the store every Saturday. She doesn’t have a car and I don’t think she could drive if she did have a car. I take her to the store and any other errands she needs every week.”

His eyes brightened when he looked at me, as he pulled me just a little closer to him. He kept his arm around me as he turned his head to Viktor and said, “we are going to the store before we leave, then.”

“Yes, sir.”

Adrik looked at me and asked, “is she ready to go? Do we need to give her time?”

“I haven’t talked to her yet today, but my guess is she’s ready to go. She usually has to wait for me to wake up. I can

call her.”

Adrik nodded his head and told Viktor to let Ivan and Misha know. He noticed the first aid kit on the counter and his

brow furrowed. He looked at it, then to me, concern on his face. “What is this for? Are you hurt again?” he asked,

holding me at arm’s length to check me over.

I laughed. “No, for once, it wasn’t me. I stitched Ivan up. I’m guessing he got hit with debris in that explosion and had a pretty good gash. He’s going to have a kickass scar from it,”

He smiled at me and pulled me to him. I wrapped my arms around him, happy to be in his arms. “Thank you,

malishka.”

“You all are in this mess because of me. It’s the least I could do.”

He sighed and said, “not exactly. Anthony was already on my shit list before he laid his hands on you. You just sped up the process.”

I hugged him tighter, not wanting to think about any of it. He responded by wrapping his arms tighter around me. I heard Viktor make a call to Ivan to let them know the change in the plan. I stepped back from Adrik and said, “I’ll call Ms. Jackson and see if she’s ready to go now.”

I told Ms. Jackson we would have chaperones on our weekly trip to the store when I called to see if she was ready to

“Oh, child. Not those strapping young men that have been watching over you?”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Yes, Ms. Jackson. Those strapping young men will accompany us to the store. Did you need to go anywhere else this week? Are your prescriptions good?”

“Can they take me across town to Edith Riley’s place? Maybe escort me through the old folk’s home like they’re my playthings?”

“Ms. Jackson! Don’t you think you’d get more mileage out of therm if they took you to Bingo?”

She giggled into the phone. “Sephie, you are a genius.”

I chuckled. “We’ll be down in a few minutes to fetch you for this adventure we’re about to have.”

“Lord, this is going to be the best shopping trip of my life. No offense, Sephie. You’re precious. But you ain’t 6’5 of chiseled muscle precious.”

“No offense taken, Ms. Jackson. See you in a few.”

was still laughing to myself and shaking my head when I walked back to the kitchen. Adrik was in my small living room, carefully studying each one of the handful of pictures I had on display. They were the only memories I had of happier times. When my mom was still alive. Before my life took a dark turn.

Adrik saw me walk into the kitchen and stood up straight, that smirk on his face that I was growing accustomed to.

“What put such a beautiful smile on your face, solnishko?”

“Ms. Jackson requested your bodyguards escort her to Bingo so she could show them off to her friends. Think they’d be down? I feel like Ivan is going to jump at this chance,” I said as I cleaned up the first aid kit on the counter and put everything back in its place.

He walked to the kitchen to stand beside me, his face scrunched in thought. “You know, I could order him to do it.”

“Oh, that’s just plain mean. I love it.” I said, smiling broadly up at him.

“I love your smile,” he said, twirling a curl around his finger as he scanned my face. That twinkle was back in his deep blue eyes. I felt myself blush and looked down at what I was doing. I felt his arm around my shoulders. He leaned down and kissed my cheek. “You don’t have to hide from me,” he said quietly as he handed me the roll of bandage

tape.

I peeked up at him underneath my lashes, his gaze intently on me, as always. “It’s just…” I stammered, not really knowing what to say. I opened my mouth to speak but ended up shutting it again.

He reached for my chin and lifted my face, so I was looking at him. He smiled sweetly at me and leaned down to press his lips to mine. Just as our lips met, we heard the door opening. I stepped back, not sure I wanted anyone to catch us kissing just yet. He laughed at my nervousness and grabbed my hands, wrapping them around his waist. I hid my face in his chest, inhaling his scent.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 14

Chapter Fourteen

Sephie

Ms. Jackson was in the backseat with me and Adrik. Viktor was driving while Andrei was in the passenger seat. We were following the other SUV with Ivan, Misha, and Stephen. You would’ve thought it was Ms. Jackson’s birthday, she was so excited.

“I haven’t been this close to this many fine–looking gentlemen since I was in my 20s,” she whispered to me. “I knew you were special, girl, but what did you do to deserve this many handsome men at your beck and call?”

I laughed. “I don’t think they’re exactly at my beck and call, Ms. Jackson.”

Adrik cleared his throat, beside me. I looked at him in shock. He smiled at me. “Whatever you need, solnishko. You say the word.”

“Did you just call her solnishko?” Ms. Jackson asked, leaning forward so she could see Adrik.

“Da. You know Russian?”

“Enough,” she sat back. She hooked her arm through mine and patted my hand. “Yep. Special, special girl,” she said quietly. I glanced at her face. She had the look of someone who was reliving her past, so I decided against asking any further questions. I felt Adrik take my other hand and lace his fingers through mine. He gently squeezed my hand.

I closed my eyes, enjoying the moment of peace I felt whenever Adrik was around. I hadn’t known him for very long, but I felt things I’d never felt whenever he was around. I tried not to think about it too much. It was unconventional, to say the least. It felt like he quieted my storms. Like he was holding my hand as I was fumbling through the darkness, keeping me steady. All I knew is that I didn’t want it to end just yet.

I felt the SUV stop and heard Viktor put it in park. Ms. Jackson made a move to open her door, but Andrei stopped her

“Not yet, Ms. Jackson. Give us moment.”

“Honey, I’ll give you as long as you want, as long as I can look at you while you’re doing whatever it is you’re about to do.”

Viktor caught my eye in the rear–view mirror. He was trying so hard not to laugh. Poor Andrei’s face was as red as my hair. He could not get out of the vehicle fast enough.

“Lord, I hate for him to leave, but I love to watch him go.”

I was laughing uncontrollably beside her. Even Adrik was laughing.

“Bingo might be in Andrei’s future, as well as Ivan’s,” Adrik said, trying to catch his breath.

“I could think of other activities that would be a whole lot more fun than Bingo,” Ms. Jackson mumbled, loud enough that only I could hear.

“Ms. Jackson, I never knew you had this side to you!”

“Well, child, you never had this much eye candy around you before.”

“Point well made”

After just a few minutes, Andrei opened Ms. Jackson’s door and offered her his hand. “Oh! And a gentleman to boot! Your mama must be so proud.”

I didn’t even have to see his face to know that he was blushing. Adrik opened his door. Stepping out, he turned and offered his hand to me. I smiled and took his hand as he helped me out of the vehicle. Once I was standing, he pulled me close and planted a very quick kiss on my lips. I looked at him, wide–eyed. He just winked at me and walked toward the store, with me in tow.

We got Ms. Jackson’s shopping completed quickly. Andrei followed her around dutifully. Viktor was roaming the store, while Ivan, Misha, and Stephen kept an eye on the parking lot. Adrik would only let go of my hand if necessary. Otherwise, he seemed happy enough to simply follow me around while I helped my neighbor stock up for the week.

When we got back to Ms. Jackson’s apartment, she looked at Andrei and Adrik and asked, “gentlemen, would it be possible for me to have a moment alone with Miss Sephie?”

They both nodded. Adrik looked at me and said, “we’ll be right outside.”

As soon as the door closed, Ms. Jackson took each of my hands in hers and looked up at me. “Child, do you know that man is in love with you?”

“What? No. We just met. Literally. Like two days ago.”

“No, dear. Can you not see the way he looks at you?”

“Well, I mean, yeah, but it doesn’t mean he’s in love with me.”

“He calls you solnishko.”

“They all call me different Russian words. I have no idea what any of them mean. They could be calling me a bitch for all I know.”

She scoffed. “Hardly. Russian men are not known for terms of endearment, so the fact that he’s calling you his ‘little sun‘ only days after meeting you means he’s head over heels for you. What else does he call you?”

“Little sun? I don’t get it,” I said shaking my head.

“It’s one of like five terms of endearment for a significant other in Russian. They’re not a sentimental people. What else?”

“I think he called me malishka once.”

“I rest my case. He’s smitten. What do the other men call you?”

“Well, just Viktor and Andrei. Misha and Ivan aren’t as chatty, although Ivan did call me a princess, when I stitched him up this morning. Viktor and Andrei have both called me sestrichka a couple of times.”

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Chapter Fourteen

“Lord, they’re all in love with you.”

“No way, Ms. Jackson. You’re being silly. What does it mean? And how do you know Russian??”

“It’s a pet name for a little sister, but again, only reserved for very special women,” she said. “And as for me knowing Russian, well, I spent time there during the Cold War.” She sighed, and added very matter–of–factly, “I was spying on the Russians while they thought I was feeding them information on the Americans.”

“What?? How have you never told me you were such a badass before??” I gasped, “is that how you know how to stitch people up? Did I really learn how to do that from a legit spy? You told me you were a nurse!”

She laughed. “Well, I was technically a nurse too. After I came back, I went into nursing. Being a spy is hard on a girl.” She sighed. Again, lost in her memories. “That was a long time ago, honey. But you need to know that you are the light to that man’s dark. You are living up to your namesake, dear child,” she said as she reached up and patted my cheek.

“I don’t think I understand.”

“Adrik. It means dark. When he calls you solnishko, he’s telling you that you are the light in his dark world.”

I sighed. “I don’t…I don’t know what to say.’

She smiled at me. “You don’t have to say anything, dear. You just have to continue to be yourself. How long have I been telling you now that you’re a special girl? You never believed me, but it doesn’t make it any less true. My wish for you is that you’ll let that man show you how special you are.”

“Ms. Jackson…” I felt the tears welling up in my eyes.

“Hush, child. You deserve every bit of the kingdom that man can give you. Just promise me you’ll keep the eye candy around for me to appreciate.”

“I promise I’ll make the Bingo escort happen.”

She threw her head back and laughed. “Are you sure you want to be responsible for the sheer number of heart attacks you will cause with those kinds of shenanigans? You know ol‘ Edith has a pacemaker. She can’t handle that kind of excitement.”

“That’s fair.” I chuckled as I leaned down to give her a hug. She might’ve been old, but her frame gave the impression that she was lean and strong in her prime. And she could still give the best hugs. Ms. Jackson was quick to befriend me when I first moved into the apartment. I think she knew I was nothing more than a lost little girl and I’ll forever be grateful that she took pity on me and helped me find myself.

“Now. You go to him. I know you’re going away for a little bit. I heard them talking when they thought I couldn’t understand them. It’s for your safety and I agree. The man they’re looking for is not a good man and if he’s the one who gave you that masterpiece on your neck, then they need to find him before I do.”

“I’ll come back to check on you. I’ll have to take you back to the store next week, too.”

“Don’t you worry about me, child. I may be old, but I’m still resourceful. You stay safe and you let those men protect you. I know you like to argue, but you listen to them when it counts, you hear me. I can see it on the face of every single one of them. They love you and will die trying to protect you, so you let them.”

Chapter Fourteen

I chuckled, “well, maybe not Ivan. He looks at me like he’s trying to burn holes through my soul.”

“You don’t know Russian men, honey. That bear of a man would do anything you asked, especially after you stitched him up. He’s putty in your hands. You just can’t put up with his shit.”

“Well, I can’t say I believe you on that one. I’m still heavily under the impression that he would rather murder me himself.”

“Give it time. You’ll see I’m right. Your mother blessed you with the name of a queen. It’s time you stepped into that role.”

Chapter Fifteen

Sephie

After helping her put away the rest of her groceries, I closed her apartment door behind me. I was lost in thought as I turned to find Adrik waiting, just like he had promised. He was standing just past the breezeway, smoking, and on the phone. When he saw me, he put out his cigarette and extended his arm to me. I walked over to him, allowing him to wrap his arm around my waist. Still on the phone, he kissed the top of my head as I rested my head against his shoulder.

I felt his body tense and suddenly his words had a deadly tone to them. I couldn't understand what he was saying, but I knew it wasn't good. He was normally soft–spoken, but he raised his voice while talking to the person on the other end. All while he gently twirled my curls in his free hand. I had to chuckle at the absurdity of this man probably threatening someone's life while playing with my hair like he wasn't threatening someone's life.

He abruptly ended the call and looked down at me.

“I'm sorry, solnishko. Business,” he sighed as he put his phone away.

I smiled at him, and his body immediately relaxed. “No need to apologize. It wasn't my life you were threatening just then.”

His breath caught. He pulled me so I was standing in front of him and held me close. His eyes scanned my face and my hair for several moments. I thought back to what Ms. Jackson had just told me as his looks softened the longer we stood like that. I smiled at him. I liked seeing his face soften,

“I will never tire of your beautiful smile,” he said as he brushed my hair back from face, placing it behind my shoulders. “Nor your amazing hair.” His hands ran down my back, giving me goosebumps. He looked deeply into my eyes as he held me securely against him. “You look extra beautiful today.”

“It's all the eye candy I'm surrounded by. It's beauty by default,” I laughed.

“Your neighbor is a very interesting woman,” his thumbs rubbing my lower back as he held me close.

“Oh, you have no idea.”

He cocked his head slightly and looked at me inquisitively. I laughed again, “you'll have to ask her. It's not my story to tell.”

He chuckled, “whatever it is, I'm grateful that it allows me to see your smile.”

I felt my cheeks flush, but instead of looking down like usual, I stood on my toes and kissed his cheek in a moment of unbridled bravery.

“I owe Ms. Jackson a thank you, clearly,” he said, wrapping his arms around me.

“I owe you a thank you for taking Ms. Jackson to the store today. I know it was not part of your plan for the day but thank you.”

“Of course. I want to make sure you are safe. Always. Now come, we should leave,” he broke the embrace and took my hand, leading me up the stairs to my apartment. “You should grab a few things. I don't know how long you'll be gone.”

Adrik left me to gather a few things while he went to speak with Viktor in the living room. I could hear their hushed voices as I stood in the middle of my bedroom, trying to decide what to do. I was feeling very conflicted. On one hand, I felt completely safe with a man who was basically a stranger, and also the king of the underworld. On the other hand, was I really going to allow him to take me away from my life? I knew it wasn't much, but I had worked hard to build my little life I was living. I went from having absolutely nothing when I left my old life to being able to take care of myself all on my own. I didn't have many friends, but the ones I did have, I cherished. If I left now, would I ever see them again? Would I ever be able to make my own decisions again? Was he taking me somewhere to lock me in the proverbial ivory tower, never to be seen again?

I thought back to Ms. Jackson's words from earlier. “It's for your safety and I agree. The man they're looking for is not a good man“. I shook my head, trying to make sense of everything that was happening. “I know you like to argue, but you listen to them when it counts, you hear me. I can see it on the face of every single one of them. They love you and will die trying to protect you, so you let them.”

Ugh, why does my life always have to be so difficult? I exhaled and went to my closet to grab a bag. Just a few things. Just a few days. Then I can come back. They'll find Anthony and I'll be able to come back. It'll be fine. I can do this.

As I was zipping my bag closed, Adrik came to my bedroom. His genuine concern showing on his face. “You okay, solnishko?” He closed the distance between us, and I felt myself relax when his arms wrapped around me once again.

I sighed, “yeah, I think so. It's just for a few days, right?”

“I hope.” He put his hands on either side of my face and looked deeply in my eyes. “I want to keep you safe. I'm only taking you away from here to keep you safe.” He noticed the tears forming in my eyes. “Shhh. It will be okay. I promise,” he gently pressed his lips to mine.

We both heard a knock on my open bedroom door. Viktor, taking up the entire doorway, said urgently, “boss, we must

1. go. Now.”

Without any hesitation, he grabbed my hand and started walking toward the door. “Grab her bag.” His grip on my hand was tight, his shoulders visibly tense. When we got to the kitchen, I noticed they had closed all my blinds and Misha already had his gun drawn. “How close?” Adrik asked.

“Five miles out, but our spotter said four vehicles. We don't know how many routes they're taking.” Misha handed Adrik two bulletproof vests. Adrik turned to me and said, “arms up. I need to put this on you.” I raised my arms, as he slid the vest over my head and arms. He reached back and swept my hair back, out of the vest. He secured the sides of the vest and kissed my forehead before putting his own vest on.

Adrik nodded and went to the door of my apartment. When he opened the door, Andrei was there with a rifle in his hands and a tactical vest on, looking like he was ready to kill any and everyone that got in his way. My eyes went wide, taking in the change from happy giant Andrei to GI Andrei. “Shit just got real, ya'll,” I said to nobody in particular. Adrik didn't respond, he simply pulled me against his side, wrapping his arm tightly around my body. “We're getting out of here, but you keep your head down, and no matter what, you stay by my side.”

I nodded.

“Time?” Adrik asked as he started down the stairs, following Misha. Viktor was behind us, while Andrei covered the parking lot from the landing.

“Three minutes,” Misha replied.

We rushed to the waiting vehicles. Adrik opened the back door of the second one, hurrying me inside. I jumped in, sliding over to make room for him. Viktor threw my bag in the first vehicle and jumped in the front seat. Ivan was driving the vehicle we were in. Stephen driving the other. Misha was in the back seat of the first vehicle and just as I was about to inquire about Andrei, he jumped in the front seat of our vehicle.

Chapter Sixteen

Sephie

The SUVs tore out of the parking lot and raced down the back alley toward the main road. Adrik pulled me close beside him, helping me to stay steady on the sharp turns. We were so close to the first vehicle that I thought for sure we were going to hit them, but whatever move the first vehicle made, Ivan countered it perfectly. He always stayed a consistent distance from the vehicle, no matter what. If I wasn't scared out of my mind, I might be impressed.

We had made it 2-3 streets over from my apartment, weaving through the city to make it to the freeway when two of the other SUVS we were running from showed up in traffic behind us. Ivan sped up and passed Stephen, putting their vehicle between us and the two SUVS weaving through traffic to get closer. I turned around to look at how close the other vehicles were to them. There were only a few cars in between them now. Their vehicle started to slow, and I saw

Viktor lean out of the window, gun pointing behind their vehicle, I heard two shots and the first SUV veered off the street, plowing into parked cars. The second SUV didn't stop, it just replaced the first vehicle that had just crashed.

We were suddenly turning sharply, and I grabbed onto Adrik to keep from being thrown across the back seat. We were speeding through the side streets, going the wrong way down one-way streets. Adrik smiled gently at me. "Almost there, solnishko. It will be fine."

I stared at him in amazement. We were in the middle of a high-speed pursuit. Gunfire was popping off behind us and he was as calm as could be. And smiling on top of it all? This man was not normal.

Another sharp turn threw me into him this time. His arms wrapped around me, holding me steady. "Don't worry, I've got you." I responded by grabbing his arms that were wrapped around me and holding tightly. "Shhhh…" he quietly cooed into my hair. "It will be over soon."

There was a loud explosion behind us. I sat up abruptly and looked behind us, worried s*ck that I would see Viktor, Misha, and Stephen's vehicle flying through the air. Instead, they were once again right behind us, but the back hatch was open. I let out the breath I had unknowingly been holding and turned forward in my seat once more.

"See? I told you. We'll be fine," Adrik said as he grabbed my hand and held it in his.

I looked up at him, still somewhat wide-eyed, as I was still amazed that he could remain so calm in this situation. The vehicle veered onto the freeway, Ivan increasing his speed even more. I had no doubt that Stephen was once again inches away from the back of our vehicle.

Andrei radioed Misha, "the other two?"

Misha responded, "they went to the apartment. There's no way they'll catch up to us now."

Andrei turned in his seat, to look at Adrik. "We're 15 minutes out, sir. It looks to be clear now."

Adrik nodded, I felt his body relax slightly as Andrei turned forward in his seat. I squeezed his hand, resting my head against his shoulder.

Those 15 minutes seemed to go by quickly. Before I knew it, we were pulling up in front of giant iron gates. The gates swung open, closing after the SUV behind us. We drove down the long driveway and pulled in front of the house. The grounds were immaculately kept, with giant oak trees along the driveway. Their branches making a canopy for the

driveway.

Once the vehicles stopped, we all got out. I ran to Viktor and threw my hands around his neck, completely catching him off-guard. He just stood frozen for a moment, but eventually returned the hug, with his giant arms wrapping around me. His giant frame making me feel like a midget. "I was so worried," I whispered to him.

He let out a chuckle. He stepped back and looked at me, a glint in his eye, "it's going to take a lot more than that to keep me down." I smiled at him, then went to Misha and Stephen and hugged them both. "Thank you." Neither knew what to say, they just smiled sheepishly at me.

I walked back toward Adrik and Andrei who were watching the exchange, amusement evident on their faces. As I got closer, Andrei opened his arms and said, "do I get one too?" I giggled and jumped into his arms. He picked me up and swung me around, as I squealed. He set me down, laughing. "I could get used to this kind of appreciation."

Ivan walked around the front of the vehicle to stand behind Andrei. I walked to him and extended my hand to him. "You don't strike me as the hugging type," I said. He grabbed my hand and pulled me in for a bear hug. "Can you teach me how to drive like that?" I whispered to him.

He laughed for the second time since I met him. "Sure," was all he said as he let me go. I grinned at him and walked back to Adrik. He opened his arms for me, and I readily wrapped my arms around him, resting my head on his chest. "I saved the best for last," I said quietly so that only he could hear me. His arms tightened around me.

Chapter Seventeen

Adrik

While Persephone was having a private conversation with her neighbor, I decided to light a cigarette. Inhaling deeply, my mind racing in circles, wondering why we couldn’t get reliable information on Anthony’s whereabouts. There was no way that asshat of a child could get the loyalty of this much of the city. He had to have help, which meant I had dissenters in my ranks. Even more than the situation with Anthony, that bothered me.

When I took over the business from my father, I tried to be fair and reasonable in every one of my decisions. My father was known for being ruthless, and maybe greedier than he should’ve been. No one ever called him on it on account of his reputation. I wanted to take the business in a different direction, where we weren’t constantly at war with the people of the city, or the police. It was exhausting. Too many good people died because of my father’s rule. I was tired of death on a daily basis.

Gradually, I mended the relationships with the people of the city. We started giving back to the people, supporting their causes, giving money for little leagues, building parks. With a little time, the people of the city lost their fear of my organization. They started coming to us for business deals, for help with matters that the city wouldn’t help with. My empire has grown exponentially as a result, but the people of the city are safe. They’re protected. Gone are the days when kids couldn’t play outside for fear of stray bullets.

I was proud of what I had done. The police worked with us, instead of against us. Sure, they required their cut of the illegal side of the business, but that’s to be expected. They knew what we were doing in the dark, but because we had helped build the city up so much, they said nothing about it. This was how you conducted business successfully.

Now, clearly, I had at least one boss, likely more, that had openly declared war on me. What was his end game? It can’t be all to do with Sephie. I would still end his life for harming her, but there had to be more to his play. What was he after? Power? Territory? Did he know that I found out about his recent venture into human trafficking?

That was a lucrative business, but one that I absolutely would not allow. It was disgusting. More so than the drugs and the gambling. I forbid it and every other boss in the city knew it. I’ll give Anthony credit, he had serious cojones for going against my direct order. It would not serve him well in the end, but he had chutzpah.

As I took another drag from my cigarette, my phone rang. Looking at it, I recognized the number and answered right away. It was my spy that I kept at the private airport just outside the city. I wanted to know where Anthony was going should he try to leave the city.

“Hey boss, so I have good news and I have bad news.”

“Good news first.”

“Anthony has chartered a flight for middle of the week. He’s on the passenger manifest, along with his four closest associates.”

“And the bad news?”

“There’s no flight path logged yet. They have time to log it, granted, but I have a feeling that they’re going to take off without logging it to try and give us the slip.”

Chapter Seventeen

My jaw clenched as I felt the temper I had inherited from my father threatening to rise up to the surface. I turned to see Sephie stepping out of Ms. Jackson’s apartment. I put out what was left of my cigarette and extended my arm to her. She was the key to keeping my temper under control right now. So help me, every single time she was near me, I felt completely calm and in control. From the first moment I looked at her unabashedly staring at me in the restaurant, I felt complete calm and peace when she was near. I don’t understand how, but I know I will do whatever I need to do to protect that feeling.

As soon as she sees my outstretched arm, she walks quickly to my side. She fits perfectly next to me. I’ve never been with a woman as tall as her and I didn’t realize what I’ve been missing. She’s still shorter than I am, but I don’t have to break my back bending over to kiss her. She instantly wraps her arms around me and rests her head against my shoulder. I know I will never tire of feeling her against me. I placed a kiss on the top of her head and went back to my conversation.

“Can you stop the plane from taking off without a flight path logged?”

“Technically, no. They can log a path while they’re in the air”

“I’m not asking for the legal method here.”

“We can ground the plane by force, but it won’t be pretty, and I can’t guarantee that everyone on the plane won’t be dead at the end of it.”

My frustration with this situation got the best of me. I raised my voice enough to drive my point home. “I pay you for guarantees. If they’re not scheduled to leave until the middle of the week then you have three days to fucking figure something out. If you don’t figure out how to both keep him from leaving, as well as keep him alive in the process, then it will be your life that is lost.”

I ended the call and put my phone back in my pocket. I looked down to see Sephie peeking up at me. “I’m sorry, solnishko. Business.”

Her beautiful smile stretched across her face, “No need to apologize. It wasn’t my life you were threatening just then.’

I inhaled sharply. I thought she didn’t understand Russian? She could gather I was threatening someone just from the tone of my voice? She was truly remarkable. I pulled her in front of me, taking in how stunning she was in the afternoon sunlight. “I will never tire of your beautiful smile,” I said. I watched the way the sunlight brought out new shades of red and auburn. Twirling a curl between my fingers, I added “nor your amazing hair.” My hands roamed over her back, wanting to feel her soft skin underneath her shirt, but not wanting to be too forward. I settled for holding her close and told her, “you look extra beautiful today.”

She laughed. Her smile growing wider, “it’s all the eye candy I’m surrounded by. It’s beauty by default.”

Whatever it was, I would gladly take it.

Chapter Eighteen

Adrik

We pulled up to the estate finally. It was close. Too close, considering we had Sephie with us. I already knew I would burn the entire city to the ground if something happened to her. She only just came into my life, but without her, the careful self–control I'd created since taking over from my father would be gone with her last breath. I would turn into him, and the city would pay.

We stepped out of the vehicle. She immediately ran to the vehicle behind us, straight to Viktor. She slammed into him, hugging his neck tightly. He was taken aback by her gesture and looked to me before moving. I simply nodded. He wrapped his arms around her, like an older brother reuniting with his favorite sister after a long absence. She then went to both Misha and Stephen and gave them each a hug too.

I couldn't help but smile at her innocence. Her light shone so brightly that I was sure it could light the entire world. Even my men, who are normally quite grumpy and say very little, have all turned into little puppies around her. They will gladly follow her around, just to be near her. We all saw the good in her.

She made her way back toward me and Andrei, who was standing next to me. He stretched his arms wide and asked, "do I get one too?" She beamed at him as she ran to him. He picked her up and swung her around, as she squealed. I made a mental note that she enjoyed that. I caught myself wondering what else would make her squeal.

When Andrei set her down, he said "I could get used to that kind of appreciation." She caught sight of Ivan and squared her shoulders as she walked to him. She extended her hand to him saying, "you don't strike me as the hugging type." He looked at her but was completely defenseless against how brightly her light shone on him. He grabbed her hand and pulled her into his bear arms, closing his eyes tightly like he was fighting back a flood of emotions. She said something to him, and I was shocked at his reaction. He laughed. Ivan has been working for me for ten years and I've rarely seen that man smile, much less laugh.

I shook my head, watching her with my men. They were all trained killers, but in the span of about 2 days she had wrapped every single one of them around her finger. And she had no idea.

She turned away from Ivan and made her way back to me. She wrapped her arms around me, placing her head on my chest. She whispered, just loud enough that only I could hear her, "I saved the best for last."

It was that moment that I knew, unequivocally, that I was madly in love with this woman. I would die to protect her. I

would work every day of this life to keep her by my side.

I kissed the top of her head, thinking about how happy I was in that moment. It didn't make sense. We just escaped death, but we were all standing around smiling like idiots.

Because of her.

"Come, let me show you to your room," I said, grabbing her hand and walking toward the steps to the front door. Her

e took

eyes were wide with wonderment as she took in the house.

As we walked through the front door, she could see the grand staircase and the chandelier hanging from the high ceiling in the foyer. There were two wings off that main hallway. My men stayed in the east wing, while all the staff of the house stayed in the west wing. I had the top floor to myself. Sephie would be staying in a room right across from

my bedroom, so I could be close to her while still giving her some space.

Sephie looked around, eyes still wide. "Are you going to have someone stationed periodically through the house just to give me directions?" She pretended to have a British accent as she said, "yes, madam, if you will just walk down the grand hall, there will be a phone at the end. Pick that up. They will direct you to the restroom from there."

I just shook my head and led her to the stairs. "It's really not that confusing. You'll find your way around in no time. The important thing to remember is that the boys all have rooms to the right as you walk in the door. The kitchen is that way," I said pointing to the left of the staircase. "I'll show you to your room for now. I have some business to take care of, but if you like, I can show you around the rest of the house later."

She nodded eagerly. "I would very much like."

"How can I refuse then? I'll give you the grand tour when I'm done. Come. Your room awaits," I said, giving her my best butler impression.

She giggled and followed me up the stairs. Even the way her laugh echoed on the marble floors was music to my ears.

I stopped in front of her room, opening the double doors, and stepping aside for her to enter first. "Here we are, madam. Your suite." She walked past me and gasped as she took in the room.

All of this? For me? Shit. I'm gonna get lost just trying to find the bathroom in this one room." She paused, turning around to take in the full 360–degree view. "My entire apartment could fit in this room."

I laughed. "Come, you haven't even seen the best part yet," I grabbed her hand and pulled her toward her private balcony. It overlooked the pool below, but she had the best view of the gardens, as well as the mountains in the distance. I would stand on this balcony during the summer nights, inhaling the sweet floral aroma from the hundreds of flowers below on nights when I couldn't sleep.

"This…this is beautiful," she said, her hand covering mouth.

"And that is why you will be staying in this room." She was standing at the railing of the balcony, her hands now resting on the stone rail. I walked up behind her and wrapped my arms around her waist.

"I love this view," she said, breathlessly.

I turned her to face me, keeping my arms around her. "I love this one more," I said as I gently kissed her. She responded by wrapping her arms around my neck and pulling me closer to her. Without hesitating, I deepened the kiss. I had been holding back before, but after this afternoon and being that close to something potentially happening to her, I needed her to know how much I needed…her.

I heard her moan softly and she faltered briefly, like her knees gave way. I grabbed her waist lower and picked her up off the ground so she wouldn't have to stand. I felt her giggle against my lips. She stopped the kiss just long enough to look into my eyes. She put her hands on either side of my face and kissed me even more passionately than before. I couldn't get enough of her, and she couldn't get enough of me.

After a moment, she broke free, breathing heavily. She gazed deeply in my eyes, almost like she was searching for something. Like she was reading my soul. She could have it all, as far as I was concerned. I'd never met anyorie like her, and I knew I never would again. She smiled sweetly at me and planted a chaste kiss on my lips. "You have business, remember?"

I lowered her to the ground once again, not wanting to let her go. I groaned. "I'd much rather ignore that and stay with you."

She chuckled and tried to push me away. "The sooner you get it done, the sooner you can finish my tour of this castle. Or would you rather I explore on my own and remain lost for 3 years before I find my way out?"

"You have excellent negotiation skills," I said as I pulled her back to me for another quick kiss before turning to leave. "Rest and relax. The guys will be downstairs if you need anything. My bedroom is just across the hall and my office is

at the end of the hall."

"I'll be here. Maybe I'll have a dance party since there's so much floor space. You never know," she said, raising one

eyebrow at me.

I sighed, "solnishko." I couldn't help myself. I stole one more kiss. I felt her moan again in my mouth, right before I felt her hands on my chest, pushing me away.

"Go!" She said, pointing to the door. I laughed and turned toward the door.

"End of the hall or across the hall if you need me. You can always come in my rooms, no matter what is happening.

Always," I said one more time, for emphasis.

She nodded and watched me walk out of her room.

As soon as the door closed behind me, I felt like I was already missing her. The more time I spent with her, the less I wanted to leave her. These would end up being the fastest business calls I'd made in a while, just so I could get back to

her.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 19

Chapter Nineteen

Adrik

I had a stack of reports on my desk to get through by the end of the day today. I hadn’t planned on our extra excursion to the grocery store, so I was hoping to have these completed by now. I sighed, remembering how much I had laughed just today alone. Sephie made mundane activities like the grocery store fun somehow.

1 shook my head, still not completely sure how I found myself here, but not wanting to change a thing about it, other than not being able to find Anthony. I sighed, picking up the first folder and diving in. The sooner I get it done, the sooner I can finish her tour of this castle. I smiled, reading boring import reports.

It took me considerably less time than it normally would have to get through the reports, but I had still been in my office for close to two hours. I walked out of my office and headed straight for her bedroom door. I knocked softly and waited for a response. When I got none, I knocked once more. Again, no answer. I opened the door slowly, not entirely sure if I should enter her room without permission. I didn’t want to catch her by surprise.

I stuck my head around the door and scanned the room, looking for her. My eyes landed on her curled up on the bed, on top of all the covers, napping. I walked to the bed, intending to cover her up, as there was a cool breeze now coming in through the open balcony door. As I pulled a blanket over her, she woke up and immediately her warm eyes were smiling at me. “Hi,” she said in a hoarse whisper. Her throat was still damaged from Anthony, the hoarseness apparent when she was tired.

I sat down on the edge of the bed and ran my hand up her leg, resting on her hip. “Hi. I’m sorry it took me so long, solnishko.”

“Don’t be sorry. You’re an important man and have important matters to attend to. The world doesn’t stop turning, Adrik. Especially not for me.” I felt that tightness in my chest at her words but chose not to address it just yet. There was more meaning behind those words, but now was not the time. I reached up to brush her curls away from her face.

“Would you still like the grand tour? We can do it tomorrow. You can rest now.”

“No, no. I want to see everything. I didn’t mean to fall asleep. Show me everything,” she said, sitting up beside me.

Standing up, I offered her my hand. “Well, in that case, please, follow me.”

She eagerly took my hand and stood beside me. Just as she stood up, her stomach growled so loudly that I’m not certain a dead person could’ve heard it.

“So, can we start with the kitchen? I just remembered that I haven’t eaten today. Clearly. As literally everyone in the house could hear.”

“I will feed you and then we will finish the tour. You have my undivided attention for the rest of the night.”

Longer, if you wish, solnishko.

Sephie

I happily followed Adrik down the stairs toward the kitchen. I had completely forgotten to eat all day long and now I

was sure I could eat enough for three people. When we got to the bottom of the stairs, my bare feet hit the cool marble of the entryway. We turned to the right and walked into the largest room I think I have ever seen. This was larger than the meeting room at the back of the restaurant, even.

As we walked through the room, I spotted a grand piano in front of the impressive windows. I secretly wanted to go sit and play, but food was much more important, as my stomach grumbled once again. Quieter this time, at least.

“Can I play sometime?” I asked, pointing to the piano.

“You know how to play?”

I nodded. “My mother was a piano teacher before she died. I grew up playing.” Looking down, I added quietly, “I haven’t had access to a piano in years though.”

Adrik squeezed my hand. “You must play whenever you like. Whatever you see in the house is yours,” he said, sweeping his hand across the room.

I smiled, secretly very excited that I would be able to play, at least for a few days.

We walked into the kitchen and there was a woman at the sink. She looked like she could be late 20s, maybe older, but she took care of herself, so she likely appeared younger than her age. She had blonde hair that was pulled tightly into a bun, a wh*ite apron over her clothing. She looked up when we walked in and bowed her head to Adrik. “Boss, may I make you something?”

“What do we have for dinner, Tori?”

“Your men requested steak, but I can make you anything you like, sir.”

“I’m guessing there aren’t any leftovers from the gluttons?” He said, smirking.

“No, sir. I can make more, though. It’ll just take me a few minutes,” she said with a small smile.

Adrik turned to me and raised his eyebrow. “What do you think? Sound good?” Before I moved my gaze to Adrik, I caught Tori’s eyes going wide for a split second before she composed herself. What was that about?

“Yes, please. That sounds amazing,” I said, my mo*uth watering already. Steak was a luxury that I rarely got to enjoy. Once or twice at the restaurant when we didn’t sell enough in a week, we’d get to take one home instead of throwing them out, but I never bought it for myself.

“Then, please Tori, make us the same.”

“Yes, sir. Would you like me to call you when it’s ready?”

“That would be great. I’m going to show Sephie around while we wait.”

Of course, sir.”

Chapter Twenty

Sephie

We continued walking around the maze of rooms. The staff quarters were off the kitchen. More bedrooms for guests next to the staff rooms. There was a library on the other side of the kitchen, which I was excited about exploring. Another grand room held a few couches and oversize chairs. There were French doors leading outside to the pool and the gardens that I could see from my balcony. We walked outside, as Adrik said he wanted to show me the gardens up close. As soon as we walked by the pool, we were hit with the loveliest floral aroma from the gardens. It was even stronger than what I could smell from above. It was like walking through Heaven. I inhaled deeply.

"You like?" Adrik asked as we walked through the small maze of familiar flowers and flowers I had never seen before.

"I love. It smells amazing. I want to bottle it and wear it all the time," I laughed.

"This is one of my favorite places on the property. I come here often when I can't sleep," Adrik said.

"What are your other favorite places?" I asked.

"In good time. We don't have time right now. We must feed you before your stomach wakes up the neighborhood," he said poking me in the stomach.

I blushed, "yeah, sorry. My stomach has a mind of its own. Clearly."

He let out a small laugh. "I'm not complaining. You're not the only one who hasn't eaten today. My stomach is grateful yours sounded the alarm." I smiled up at him, loving how relaxed and at ease he seemed anytime he was near me. I'd seen the tension and the murderous aura he gave off when he was taking care of his business, but I knew I'd only seen a peek of what he was capable of. I'd seen the other bosses in the city enough to know how dangerous they were. If Adrik was above them all, that meant he was even more dangerous.

"Excuse me, sir? Your dinner is ready," Tori said from the back patio, by the pool.

"Thank you, Tori. We'll be right there," he said. He watched as she turned to leave and pulled me in close. He kissed me sweetly, his arms wrapping around me the way I had already grown to love. I returned the kiss, but then stepped out of his grasp.

"Race you!" I said, not even giving him time to register what I said before I took off running to the house.

"Oh, hell no," I heard him say as I heard his footsteps behind me. I giggled as I ran around the pool, trying to stay ahead of him to get to the door first. I barely made it to the door ahead of him and raced inside. I weaved in and out of the couches and chairs, while he chose to simply jump over them. I laughed at him, as he caught up to me and passed me. He turned just before we made it to the kitchen and caught me, sweeping me off my feet. I squealed as he lifted me into the air, spinning me around once.

"Got you," he whispered, slightly out of breath.

"No fair jumping the couches," I said, laughing, trying to catch my breath.

"Oh, now you make rules? After you lost?" he asked, still holding me like I weighed nothing. I wrapped my arms around his neck as he carried me the rest of the way into the kitchen. Tori had set two plates of food on the bar of the large island in the middle of the kitchen. She was washing a pan and looked up as we entered the kitchen. Again, I caught her eyes go wide and this time she dropped the pan she was washing, making a loud bang. She immediately dropped her gaze and kept washing.

We sat down just as she finished up. "That'll be all, Tori. We'll clean up. Thank you," Adrik said.

She simply nodded, as she was drying her hands on her apron. She kept her gaze down and left the kitchen.

"Why was she so surprised when we came into the kitchen?" I asked, cutting into my steak. It cut like butter. I was going to enjoy this. My stomach was already grumbling in anticipation.

Adrik looked at me, confused. "What do you mean, solnishko?

I finished the bite of steak I had just taken – God, it was better than I thought and said, "she was surprised when you asked me what I wanted to cat and again when you carried me into the kitchen."

He chuckled, as he cut another bite of steak. "They're not used to seeing me with a woman, solnishko. I don't bring women here. Some of the staff even think I'm gay because they've never seen a woman here with me."

"Why not?"

He rested his hands, fork and knife still in hand, on either side of his plate, seemingly lost in thought for a moment. "Because I've never found anyone worthy of coming here, until now." He turned and looked deeply in my eyes, as I was so stunned that I had quit chewing. Ms. Jackson's words, coming back to mind. "Do you know that man is in love with you?"

I just stared at him for a moment, as he took another bite of steak. "Are you just going to save that bite for later or are you going to eat it?" That smirk that I loved back on his face. I started chewing again, somewhat snapped back to reality. My mind was still racing.

"How could they think you're gay? Don't you have hundreds of women throwing themselves at you?" I asked, trying the mashed potatoes that Tori had made for us. Sweet Jesus this woman was now my favorite person because of her culinary skills.

"They try, yes. When I was younger, I dated a few of them. I slept with more of them, but there was no depth there. No feeling. They were all more interested in the empire than they were me."

I sighed. I took a drink of water, looking toward the staff quarters. "How sad."

"Hmm? What's sad?"

"It must be difficult to be in your position. You don't know who you can trust and who you can't. That's sad. Everyone needs people they can trust."

He nodded in agreement, lost in thought for a moment. "I have my men," he said. "I trust them completely. They're actually good judges of character. In the past, they've saved me from women who were just after money and power. The women showed a different side to them than they did to me." He took a drink of water, adding, "that's how I knew you were special. Every single one of my guys loves you like a little sister. I've never seen them act the way they do when they're around you."

I laughed, "even Ivan? Because I'm still convinced he would like to murder me in my sleep."

He set his fork and knife down beside his plate and turned in his seat toward me. He grabbed my chair and turned it so 1 had no choice but to look at him. "Especially Ivan, solnishko. Do you know how many years he's worked for me?"

I shook my head.

"Ten years. He's worked for me for ten years and today was the first time I've seen that man laugh. I might've seen him smile once or twice, maybe. But never, ever, have I seen him laugh. He's the most serious man I've ever known. Until he's around you. You cracked his impenetrable defenses."

"I just asked him to teach me how to drive like he does."

Adrik shook his head, chuckling. "You still don't see it."

"Don't see what?"

"How special you are."

I scoffed. "Now you sound like Ms. Jackson."

"If she said you're special, then she's a very smart woman," Adrik said, standing up and taking my completely empty plate to the sink. My stomach was so full and happy now. I leaned back in my chair and patted my full belly, my mind still racing. As Adrik turned on the water, I realized I was being no help and jumped up to help with the dishes.

"I can wash those," I said, standing next to him.

"Net. I'll do it."

I grabbed a towel and hopped up on the counter beside the sink. "Ok, you wash, I'll dry."

He smiled as he handed me a clean plate.

"Teamwork makes the dream work," I said, drying the plate.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 21

Chapter Twenty-One

Sephie

He just shook his head, smiling as he continued washing our dishes from dinner. When the last piece of cutlery was dried and put aside, he stepped in front of me, his hands sliding up my thighs and around my waist. “I like it when you’re eye level,” he said, brushing my hair back from my face.

I put my hands on his strong, muscular shoulders. My hands roaming down his arms, feeling his muscles under his shirt. He had unbuttoned the top two buttons of his shirt when he was done with work, and I could see the smallest bit of a tattoo on his chest. I was curious to see the whole thing. My hands roamed to his chest. He watched my face as I explored his upper body. I grinned and in my best Midwestern housewife accent I said, “your muscles are so big. Do you fight crime?”

He laughed heartily, taking one of my arms and throwing me over his shoulder. I let out a small scream but couldn’t do much as I was basically a sack of potatoes over his shoulder. He smacked my b*tt as we walked from the kitchen.

“Hey! No fair!” I said, trying to get out my predicament. He smacked it once more for good measure, so I leaned down and smacked his very fine a*s as we were walking. “Turnabout is fair play, you know,” I said, laughing.

The next thing I knew, he had thrown me down on one of the couches. He slowly climbed on top of me, the look of amusement still on his face. I was still laughing as he leaned over me and kissed my neck. He left a trail of small kisses down to my collarbone. His finger traced the bruise still visible on my neck. His brow furrowed as he looked at it. He cursed under his breath and said, “still too dark.”

My hand went to the back of his neck, and I pulled him to me, not wanting to think about that. I leaned up slightly to meet him as I pulled him down to me, my lips crashing into his. He pressed his body into mine, as I wrapped my arms around him, my hands roaming over his back. I could feel him get hard as he deepened the kiss even more. I moaned softly into his m*uth.

He moved to my neck once more, this time s*cking and licking as he moved down my neck. His hand moved to my breast. I moaned quietly, breathlessly, as he squeezed my breast gently, still kissing my neck.

He kissed my lips once more, his blue eyes dark as he looked deeply in my eyes. “You have no idea what you do to me,” he said, catching his breath.

“I could say the same for you,” I said, smiling up at him, running my hand through his hair. His eyes closed as he leaned into my touch. I pulled his head down to rest on my chest, while I continued to run my hand lightly through his hair. He took a deep breath, and I felt his whole body relax as we laid on the couch, completely tangled up with each other.

I thought he had fallen asleep, but he eventually sat up. I felt a vibration against my hip and realized it was his phone in his pocket. He cursed and rolled to take his phone out of his pocket. He looked at the number but didn’t answer. Instead, he looked at me apologetically, “I need to take this. Come, I’ll take you to your room first. Wouldn’t want you to get lost,” he smirked as he kissed the tip of my nose.

I laughed, “oh, thank God because I’ve been anxious about that since we left my room earlier.”

He stood up and pulled me up as well. Taking my hand in his, he led me through the house to a back stairway. “Ok, see now I’m extra glad I have an escort because I for sure would’ve gotten lost trying to figure this out on my own.”

He just chuckled and shook his head as he led me up the stairs. “You’ll get the hang of it, don’t worry.”

He stopped in front of my bedroom and said, “remember, I’m just across the hall or down the hall if you need anything.” He pulled me to him and kissed me passionately before saying, “good night, solnishko. Sweet dreams.”

“Good night, Adrik. And thank you. For everything.”

He smiled down at me, before turning toward his office. I watched him pull his phone out of his pocket before stepping into my bedroom. I closed the door and leaned against it. My mind wouldn’t stop replaying everything that had happened in the last two and a half days.

Your life is anything but boring, Sephie.

I took what was quite possibly the most luxurious shower I had ever taken in my 24 years. The shower was large enough for at least four people. It had multiple showerheads. I’ve never seen so many showerheads in one shower. I did turn them all on at once, just to see what would happen. There was water coming at me from every direction. This must be what it’s like in a car wash. It was glorious.

I threw on an oversize t-shirt and a pair of panties and climbed into bed. It wasn’t that late yet, but I found myself feeling like I could sleep for a week once again. It didn’t take long for me to fall asleep, curled up under the covers.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Sephie

I found myself in a familiar old house, d*rty from neglect. That smell of sweat that never seemed to go away hit my nostrils, giving me the familiar nausea that was constant the entire time I lived there.

No, no, no, no. I can’t be back here. I ran away. He can’t touch me. He doesn’t know where I went and he’s too l*zy to look for me.

I hear a familiar voice in my head, screaming my name. “SEPHIE! YOU GET OUT HERE RIGHT NOW!”

I knew the routine. He was going to yell at me for some perceived slight that was, in reality, his fault, but he was too drunk to remember. I sighed, hung my head, and walked to my furious uncle. Only this time, it wasn’t my uncle. It was Anthony. I froze in place when I saw it was Anthony instead of my uncle. Terror took hold. I looked around me for something I could use as a weapon, but as I was reaching for a small lamp, the scene changed completely. I was no longer in my uncle’s d*sgusting house. I was in a chair, somewhere I’d never been before. The exposed fluorescent lights flickered above me. There was one door to the room, in front of me. I tried to get up, but realized I was tied to the chair. I started to panic.

The door opened, revealing Anthony, with a sinister look in his eye. This wasn’t going to be good. He walked toward me, never taking his eyes off me. He reached out and brushed the side of my face with the back of his hand. I desperately tried to get away, just like I had tried to get away from him at the restaurant.

“Still haven’t learned your lesson, I see,” he said.

“We’ve been over this. School was not my thing. So, you tell me, who isn’t getting the lesson here – me or you?”

I felt him punch me with such force that it knocked my chair backward. I was now on my back, still tied to the chair, and unable to get free. It didn’t stop me from trying to get free, but my attempts were unsuccessful.

Think, Sephie. You’ve been in this situation before, and you got free. Keep your head in the game.

He pulled my chair upright again, leaning on the arms of the chair, so that he was eye level with me.

“You’re so pretty. It’s a sh*me to ruin that pretty face.”

“What do you want with me, Anthony? Like seriously. You said it yourself. You can have any girl you want. Why me?”

He laughed. It was not the laugh of someone who was amused, however. This was the laugh of an in*ane person. His smile didn’t reach his cold, dead eyes.

“It isn’t just you, carrot top,” he said, picking a knife off a table against the wall. “You belong to Ghost now. I saw the anger in his eyes when I smacked your a*s in that restaurant. I want to hurt him, but I can’t get to him.” He was trailing the knife down my neck to my chest. He stopped just above my heart, pressing the knife into my skin in a way that felt oddly familiar to me. “So, I hurt you to get to him. And when he comes for you? I k*ll him.”

I’m not sure what came over me at the thought of Adrik being killed, but I screamed as loud as I possibly could.

1 was suddenly not in the chair but lying in bed covered in sweat. Where was Anthony? How did I get away?

My bedroom door swung open, and Adrik rushed to me.

“Sephie! What’s wrong? What happened?” He went to grab my shoulders to pull me to him. “Jesus, Sephie, you’re soaking wet. What happened? Did you have another nightmare?”

I was still trying to comprehend what had happened and why I wasn’t dead. I looked at him and said, “you can’t come for me. If Anthony gets to me, he’s going to k*ll you if you come for me.” I burst into tears, grabbing onto him.

“Solnishko. Oh, solnishko. He won’t get to you. I promise. I will protect you. We will all protect you,” he stroked my hair and ran his hands down my back. “You’re okay. You’re safe with me. I promise.”

I s*cked in a breath and looked up at him. “He wants to use me to get to you.”

His blue eyes looked at me intensely, “tell me what happened. How do you know this? I just found this out a few hours ago.”

“He was in my dream. I was in my uncle’s house. He was yelling at me again like he did the night…. but then I wasn’t in my uncle’s house and it was Anthony instead.” I s*cked in a breath, trying to not sob as I relived my nightmare. “I asked him what he wanted with me. He said he noticed how angry you got when he smacked my a*s at the restaurant. He said he wants to k*ll you, but he can’t get to you, so he’ll use me to hurt you instead.”

Adrik swore under his breath, in Russian so that I couldn’t understand. “Sephie, did he say anything else? Can you remember anything else about your dream?”

“I was in a room that I’ve never seen before, tied to a chair. He punched me and then threatened to stab me in the heart. When he said he was going to k*ll you, that’s when I screamed and woke up.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Sephie

As if on cue, my body started shaking uncontrollably. Sometimes it was just my legs, but this time it was my entire body.

“What’s happening? Do you need a doctor? Are you having a seizure? What do you need?”

I grabbed onto his arms to try and steady myself. “I…I’m okay…This…happens… trauma…”

In one quick motion, he stood up and picked me up. He carried me to the bathroom and stepped into the shower. He turned the water on overhead, making the temperature hot enough that steam quickly began filling the bathroom. He sat on the floor, with me in his lap, holding me while I shook uncontrollably. He gently rocked me back and forth as I tried to gain control of my body again.

Slowly, the shaking stopped. Adrik’s arms around me helped to calm me down. I looked up at him, asking, “what did you mean you only just found out about Anthony’s plan a few hours ago? How did you know about my dream?”

He smiled, wiping my wet hair from my forehead. “I didn’t know about your dream, solnishko. It seems your dream knew about Anthony’s plans.”

I scrunched my face. “I don’t understand.”

He sighed, pulling me against him again. “We managed to capture one of Anthony’s closest associates. He slipped up and my men caught him. When pressed for information, he finally gave up Anthony’s plan, although he was unsure of the specific details. It was just as you said in your dream. He wants to use you to hurt me.”

“Oh,” I said, folding my arms to my chest and curling up more in between his legs on the shower floor.

“I won’t let that happen. He can make as many plans as he wishes, but he won’t get to you. I promise you.” I just nodded my head against his chest, suddenly very tired again and not wanting to think about any of this. I sighed.

He grabbed my shoulders to sit me up slightly and moved so that he was sitting more in front of me. I felt his fingers under my chin, lifting my head so that I would look at him. “He will never lay another finger on you,” he said with such intensity in his eyes that I couldn’t help but believe him.

I raised my fist between us, with only my pinky outstretched. “Pinky swear?”

“What is this?” he asked, cocking his head to the side.

My m*uth fell open. “You don’t know what a pinky swear is?” He shook his head no. I scoffed at him. “You’ve been missing out. A pinky swear is the holiest of swears there is. Like more sacred than swearing on a bible or your mother’s grave, God rest her soul. Or not. I have no idea if your mother is alive or not, now that I say that out loud.”

He just stared at me, the intensity in his eyes replaced by amusement. I grinned at him smiling at me, “what?”

“How do you do that?”

“How do I do what? Pinky swear?”

“Net. Well, yes, that too, but how do you bring joy to a truly f*cked up situation? I’m the one that’s supposed to be making you feel better and now you’re making me laugh and teaching me new holiest of swears. You are unique,

solnishko.”

“Oh. That. It’s a gift?” I said, shrugging my shoulders.

He chuckled, shaking his head. “That it is,” he said as he kissed my cheek. “Now, tell me of this holiest of swears of the pinky.”

I giggled at his description. I put my fist up again, with just my pinky out. “Ok, put your pinky up.” He did as I asked and I hooked my pinky with his and said, “this is a pinky swear. You pinky swear that Anthony will never lay another finger on me.”

His eyes lit up with amusement as he repeated, “I pinky swear that Anthony will never lay another finger on you.”

“Good.” I grinned at him, happy that he looked so happy. My eyes drifted down to his shirtless torso and his sculpted six pack. His pajama pants were completely soaked, as was my shirt. I wasn’t sure how I was getting out of the shower without giving him a show. I reached for his chest, running my hand over his tattoos. His breath caught slightly.

He wiped my hair back from my face again. “No more shaking?”

“No more shaking.”

“Wait here, I’ll get towels,” he said, standing and walking out of the shower. His soaked pajama pants left nothing to the imagination. When he turned to step out of the shower, I took in his broad shoulders and back that tapered down to his fine a*s. He walked over to the cabinet to grab a few towels, then walked back to the shower and stepped back inside, giving me a full view of his half-naked body. He had tattoos across one half of his chest, going down to a half- sleeve on his right arm. He gave new meaning to washboard abs and had that s*xy as h*ll V that disappeared in his pajama pants that were barely staying up on his hips.

He stepped back into the shower. Reaching behind me, he turned the water off, then extended his hand to help me off the floor. I kept one arm across my breasts, as my shirt was now completely see-through. Once I was standing, he opened the shower door and handed me a towel. He turned his back to me and said, “you should leave your shirt in here.”

I watched to see if he was going to peek, then I turned around and slipped my soaked shirt off over my head, dropping it on the floor of the shower. I wrapped the towel around me quickly and slipped my soaked panties off too.

While I was getting out of my wet clothes, he was too. We were both only in towels. He extended his hand to me. “Come,” he said. I placed my hand in his and followed him out of the bathroom. He walked right past my bed to the still open door of my bedroom.

“Wait, where are we going?” I said as we walked past my bed,

“Your bed is wet. You can’t sleep there. Besides, I made a pinky swear. How can I protect you from across the hall?”

I grinned at him. “You have excellent negotiation skills.”

“It’s a gift,” he said, looking back at me with his signature smirk.

Once in his bedroom, he led me next to his bed. “Wait here,” he said kissing the top of my shoulder as he walked to his closet. He returned in a new pair of pajama pants, still with no shirt, carrying a t-shirt. “Here. You can wear this,” he said, handing me his shirt. He turned around so I could slip it on. I used the towel to dry my hair.

“I can turn around now?” he asked.

“Yes, you can turn around now,” I said still drying my hair.

He turned to face me, and his m*uth fell open slightly. He inhaled sharply, “you might have to wear nothing but my shirt from now on.”

I blushed, looking down. He stood in front of me, taking the towel from me and throwing it over his shoulder. I laughed at his blatant disrespect for proper towel storage. He grinned at me, pulling me to him. “Now, I made a pinky swear, which I take very seriously. This means I’m going to have to hold onto you the rest of the night, while you sleep.” He cleared his throat, “for protection.”

I smiled at him, reveling in how much he was opening up to me in such a short time. I never would’ve guessed he had this side to him that first night we met, but the more I saw, the more I wanted to see.

“For protection,” I said as I climbed into bed. He turned the lamp off and slid under the covers next to me. He wrapped his arms around me from behind and pulled me to him. His chest against my back was so warm. I sighed, hugging his arm that was around my body. I felt my body relax as I concentrated on his steady breathing next to me. I felt so safe in his arms. Like I had never felt with any man before him. I kept listening to his breaths get slower and felt his body relax as he fell asleep. His arms stayed snug around me, not letting go even in his sleep. I found myself hoping he would never let go as I drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Adrik

I felt her stir in my arms, trying to reposition herself. I opened my eyes just enough to see that it was daylight outside and to make sure that she wasn't wanting out of my grasp. She was still sleeping, her breathing still steady and heavier than it would be were she awake. Her head was on my arm, one of her arms draped over my chest. Instead of closing my eyes, I found myself watching her as she peacefully slept next to me. I gently brushed her wild hair away from her face. Her porcelain skin giving her a doll-like appearance when she was sleeping. Freckles dotted her face. Her long eyelashes resting on her cheeks. I could stare at this woman sleeping every day for the rest of my life.

She inhaled and made a small whimper noise. I gently raised my arm underneath her head, moving her to my chest. She barely stirred, only snuggling into my chest, and draping her leg over mine. I smiled, knowing she was sleeping peacefully with me. It made me happy to know that she felt safe with me. That her nightmares wouldn't haunt her when she was with me.

My mind went back to the night before, as I gently twirled her curls around my fingers. She mentioned she was at her uncle's house when her dream first started. What uncle? What had happened that night that she couldn't say? If her uncle had hurt her, I would end him. How did she know about Anthony's plan? She wasn't even in the meeting room when I lost it on Anthony for disrespecting her. She couldn't have known.

I sighed. I needed to stop thinking about that right now or my anger was going to get the best of me. I ran my hand down her back to the bottom of my shirt that she was wearing. It had ridden up and was exposing just the bottom of her a ss. My hand found its way under the shirt to her soft skin. I started to run my hand up her back, underneath the shirt, when her hand caught mine and stopped it.

Without moving, she sighed. "I…I have scars."

"Everyone has scars, solnishko. I have scars too."

She stayed silent but sat up. She turned away from me and grabbed the bottom of the shirt, lifting it over her head. As she lifted her shirt, she revealed at least 30 lash marks crisscrossed across her back. Her milky wh ite skin helped to camouflage them slightly, but they were evident. Her back had been ripped open at some point. It was shocking. Her shoulders slumped and her head was down.

I did the only thing I knew to do. I sat up and kissed the back of her shoulder. I ran my hands lightly over her back. At first, she jumped at my touch, but eventually relaxed into it. After a few moments, I said, "you're beautiful." I kissed the back of one shoulder, across her back, to the other shoulder. I could feel her relax a little and her breath hitched like she was trying to hold back tears. I moved her hair out of the way and kissed the back of her neck. She leaned back to me, still silent. I moved so that she was sitting in between my legs and pulled her back against my chest. I wrapped my arms around her and just held her, like we were in the shower the night before. She leaned her head back against my shoulder, so I bent down and kissed her neck. She was clutching my shirt to her chest, but her grip relaxed the longer I held her. It wasn't like her to stay silent for so long. I knew she was fighting demons of the past in her head.

She took a deep breath in. I could almost feel her gathering her strength. Before she could speak, I asked, "uncle?"

She nodded but remained silent. I pulled her close and gently said, "you don't need to tell me right now. When you're ready. Right now, you just need to know that you're my solnishko and that will never change."

She reached up with one hand and quickly wiped her eyes. She leaned her head all the way back and looked up at me, over her shoulder. "Good morning," she half-laughed, like she was still choking back a sob.

"Good morning. How did you sleep?" I asked, still running my hands over her n*ked body in my lap. My morning wood unabashedly poking her in her back. Her n*kedness was not helping that go away anytime soon.

"Better with you," she said more steadily this time. She smiled sweetly up at me. I felt my heart stop every time she smiled at me.

"Then we will have to do it more often. The pinky swear must be upheld."

She laughed. Loosening her grip on the shirt, she inadvertently exposed more of her full breasts. Since she couldn't see my face, I took the opportunity to ogle her. I have no sh*me. I'm okay with that.

She was, after all, a gorgeous woman, completely n*ked, in my lap, in my bed. It was yet another Herculean test of my will to not throw her down and take her right then. She had clearly been through rough experiences, though, so I wanted it to be her idea. I would wait.

Hopefully not much longer, I thought to myself as I stared at her half-exposed breasts, wanting desperately to feel them beneath my hands. Instead, I wrapped my hands around her shoulders, massaging gently. She moaned in appreciation. This was not going to help my morning wood, but I loved hearing her moan. I caught myself wondering what else I could do to her to make her moan louder.

Before it became too difficult to control myself, I kissed the crook of her neck and got up from the bed. I walked to the bathroom. I needed a cold shower, but I opted for splashing cold water on my face instead. When I came back, she had put the shirt back on. My shirt was big on her, falling slightly off one shoulder as she was still sitting up in bed. Her knees pulled up in front of her chest, giving me a view of her long legs. In short, she looked s*xy as h*ll.

I caught her watching me walking back to the bed. Her bright eyes darkening ever so slightly as she bit her bottom lip. I crawled in front of her, reaching and swiping my thumb across her bottom lip so she would stop biting it. "You're going to have to stop that unless you want me to lose all control right now."

Her mo uth fell open slightly and her eyes went wide for just a moment. She looked like she wanted to say something, but instead closed her mo uth. I just smirked as I laid on my back in front of her. She looked me up and down a few times, then asked, "will you show me the rest of your favorite places here today?"

"Of course, solnishko. Today, we can do whatever you want. It's Sunday. Business can wait until tomorrow."

Her eyes lit up, "I can spend the whole day with you?"

I nodded. She grinned, hugging her knees. She was adorable and s*xy all at once, I was going to have to make a rule that she always had to wear my shirt to bed. I was struggling to not stare at her,

She jumped up. "I'm going to get dressed and then I want you to finish showing me around. I want to see everything!" she said, practically running out of my bedroom. I would've preferred to lay in bed with her for a while longer, but I could handle showing her the rest of the grounds. Dragging myself up, I went to get dressed as well. I grabbed a pair of jeans and another t-shirt and threw them on. In the bathroom, I ran my hands under the water and through my hair. I needed to shave, but I wasn't going to take the time to do it right now.

I heard my phone buzzing on my nightstand. I checked the text message, from my spy at the private airport.

Flight path logged. Italy.

Hmmm. This might be a distraction. Or he might be leaving. With his closest associate having been captured, he might be scared.

I'll have people there. If he shows, that plane cannot leave. If he's not there, let the plane leave.

Yes, sir.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Adrik

I locked my phone and walked into my office. I looked through the files on my desk, looking for a specific file. Without thinking, I sat down to flip through the pages of the files. I got lost in my search, not realizing that Sephie had walked quietly in. She must've noticed me lost in thought as I was searching for my answer. She walked quietly enough to the bookshelves on the other side of my office that I didn't hear her. She stood looking over the titles of the books, waiting for me to finish. When I finally looked up and noticed her there, I stopped to admire the view. She had a pair of skinny jeans on, which made her look taller than her 5'10 frame. She had a black t-shirt that hugged her curves in just the right way. Her hair falling loose over her back. I leaned back in my chair, to admire the view. She heard my chair squeak as I leaned back and turned to face me.

"Should I come back later?" she asked. Her arms were folded under her breasts, which just served to make them more prominent.

I thought back to the other women I had been with. They all hated when I worked, but they loved the benefits of my work. They would pout and throw fits when I worked, like children needing constant attention. Sephie was different. I had completely taken her away from her world. I was all she had at the moment, and she was still concerned about interrupting my work.

I stood up from my chair, closing the distance between us quickly. I grabbed her around the waist, picking her the floor and spinning her around once. "Please don't go anywhere. No more work today, solnishko. Promise."

up off

She squealed as I spun her around, wrapping her arms around my shoulders to hang on.

"Let's get some breakfast first. Wouldn't want your stomach to wake the dead again," I said, as I put her down.

She laughed at me, adding, "I would kill small woodland creatures for some French Toast right now."

"Then, come. We must go to the kitchen. To save the animals," I laughed, leading her out of my office. I never found my answer, but it would wait until later.

When we got to the kitchen, Tori was there making breakfast for the guys. The smell of bacon filled the air, making my stomach grumble. Andrei and Ivan were sitting at the bar on the island. Viktor, Misha, and Stephen were lounging on the couches in the next room.

"Morning boss. Miss Sephie," Andrei said, as he nodded toward both of us.

Sephie's face lit up when she saw them. She walked to Andrei first, wrapping her arms around his shoulders from behind. Even sitting, he was still almost as tall as her. "Good morning," she said hugging him tight. Ivan watched, with an eyebrow raised. She let go of Andrei and wrapped her arms around Ivan, telling him good morning as well.

Ivan said, "why do you hug him first? I'm better looking. You should hug me first." Without missing a beat, she looked at him and said, "you're going to have to get that murderous aura under control if you want to be hugged first, Ivan the Terrible."

"Humph."

She giggled and leaned in to kiss his cheek sweetly. He blushed, while Andrei laughed. Andrei's laughter brought the other guys into the kitchen. I stood leaning against the island, watching her interact with them. I caught Tori staring wide-eyed while Sephie hugged Ivan. She looked at me when Sephie kissed his cheek, clearly not sure that I would be okay with it. I could be jealous, but not with her and my men. I trusted them completely. Andrei told me immediately that she had offered to marry him. He thought I was going to be mad at him, but I just laughed. Watching her with them, I realized that I trusted her just as much as I trusted them. She loved them, but she didn't look at them the same way she looked at me. There was no need for jealously. I just shrugged my shoulders at Tori when she looked surprised to see Sephie kiss Ivan's cheek.

As soon as Viktor walked into the kitchen, he held his arms out to her. "Miss Sephie!" he said in his booming voice.

She ran to him, jumping into his arms. "My favorite bodyguard!" she exclaimed. All four other men said in unison, "hey, wait a minute!"

Viktor laughed, as he put her down. Looking at the other guys he said, "you guys just need to be better looking. It's simple, really."

She smacked his arm lightly. "Don't get cocky. I'm still marrying Andrei."

Misha stepped in, grabbing her hand, and pulling her close to him, in a dance position. "But Miss Sephie, Andrei can't dance. How can you marry a man who can't dance with you at your own wedding?" He led her in a few tango steps around the kitchen. She was trying hard to conceal her laughter as they danced.

"Misha, you surprise me. You're so…cultured," she curtseyed to him once he let her out of the embrace. He bowed low to her.

"Milady."

Stephen stepped in and said, "do you really want to marry a guy you need to worry about leaving you for another man though?" Laughter erupted in the kitchen. Even Tori ended up laughing at Stephen's joke. Sephie was speechless, which was impressive given her constant comebacks. She simply gave Stephen a high-five and then smacked his a*s. "Good game," she said.

"Thanks, coach."

Tori was setting out plates of food for the guys as Sephie walked back to me. She was smiling at me, with that spark in her eye that only I could see. I extended my arm to her and pulled her in front of me. I wrapped my arms around her from behind.

Tori looked at me, "what can I get you for breakfast, boss?"

"Sephie threatened violence against small animals if she doesn't get French toast, so we better make that happen. Don't want animal rights activists picketing outside."

Tori looked puzzled but nodded her head. "Right away, boss."

Sephie added, "I mean I wouldn't really kill small woodland critters. I would think long and hard about it, but my follow-through is shit."

Andrei choked on a piece of bacon as he laughed. Tori set a new glass of orange juice in front of him, a look of concern on her face. "Drink this," was all she said. He looked sheepishly at her and grabbed the glass.

Sephie caught the exchange as well and looked over her shoulder, catching my eye. She smiled at me, knowingly.

It didn't take Tori long and Sephie had her French toast. We finished breakfast while the guys hung around and talked in the kitchen. Tori finished up and excused herself. Andrei's eyes on her the whole time as she walked from the kitchen. Sephie caught him watching her. She caught my eye and looked back to Andrei, raising her eyebrows several times in a row. I laughed, shaking my head. I had never noticed that Andrei had his eye on Tori until today. Sephie really had a way of bringing out the best in everyone, without even trying.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Sophie

After breakfast, we were all standing in the kitchen. I asked Ivan how his stitches were holding up. “Let me check it. You might need a bandage change,” I said, trying to peek down the back of his shirt. He didn’t hesitate this time to take his shirt off for me. I peeled back part of his bandage, to look at how it was healing. It still looked red and angry, but no signs of infection.

Adrik walked over to inspect the stitches while I had the bandage pulled back. “You did this?” he asked, looking surprised.

I nodded my head, as I put the bandage back in place. Pressing the adhesive to his skin once more.

“Where did you learn how to do that?” Adrik asked, still surprised.

“Ms. Jackson. She used to be a nurse.” I lifted the sleeve of my shirt to reveal a small scar on my upper arm. “I can be clumsy, and I h*te doctors, so she stitches me up when needed. She taught me how to do it.”

Adrik ran his thumb over the scar on my arm. He leaned closer and kissed my forehead. I knew he was wondering about the scars on my back as well, but I didn’t want to talk about those in front of everyone. “I definitely owe my thanks to Ms. Jackson,” he said.

“There’s still the matter of Bingo to be discussed,” I said laughing.

Ivan, as he was putting his shirt back on, turned and asked, “Bingo?”

Viktor, the only one in the know on the matter of Bingo night, just started laughing. “Don’t worry, Ivan. You’re going to love it.”

I tried not to laugh but couldn’t help myself. Ivan looked so confused. “Ms. Jackson requested that you all accompany her to her friend’s place so she could ‘show you off,” I said, adding air quotes for effect. “But I suggested Bingo, as more of her friends would be there.”

“What is Bingo?” Misha asked.

“It’s a game that old people play. It’s an easy game to play. You’ll catch on quick, don’t worry,” I said, grinning.

They all looked toward Adrik. I knew they would all do it if he said the word.

“It’s on the table. But we need to find Anthony first,” Adrik said, matter-of-factly.

There was an audible exhale in the room. I laughed at how the thought of Bingo with old ladies gave trained killers anxiety.

Adrik and I walked around the property after breakfast. It was much more expansive than I thought. There was a running trail that took you through the woods, opening to a meadow and a lake toward the back of the property. He had guards, with dogs patrolling the grounds. We also had our own guard with a dog following us as we walked the property. They stayed far enough away that they couldn’t hear our conversation but kept us within sight the entire time.

As we came into the meadow, overlooking the lake, Adrik turned to me and said, “this is another favorite place of mine.”

I took in the view. The meadow was full of wildflowers, covering the area in a blanket of colors. The trail wound around the meadow to the lake. It split off, so you could either go all the way around the lake or take the shorter route around the meadow. We had stopped for a moment, to look at the lake. Adrik picked up a rock and skipped it across the water.

I knew I needed to address what happened that morning. To explain my scars. I always hated this part of getting to know someone new. Having to explain what happened and then waiting to see if they started to look at me differently. Most people did. I’d only found a few who didn’t look at me like damaged goods after finding out about my past. Max was one of those that didn’t look at me differently.

I had agreed to go workout with him at the gym one day after work. I had bent over to pick up a dumbbell and my shirt rode up my back, revealing part of my scars. He saw them but didn’t ask right away. He waited a few days and then asked where they came from. When I told him the story, he just hugged me. No words, no “I’m so sorry that happened.” No “I can’t believe that happened to you.” He just hugged me and then finally said, “I’m glad you got away.”

I was waiting for our relationship to change. Waiting for him to start avoiding me, or to look at me differently, but he never did. If anything, it made our relationship stronger. He started confiding in me more and asking my opinion on his dating life. He was probably the first man that didn’t run for the hills at the first chance.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Sephie

I took a deep breath. Adrik glanced my way, his eyebrow raised. I just started my story. The faster I told him, the faster it would be over. I told him everything. How my father had died when I was young, so I was raised by my mother. I had no siblings, as she never remarried or even dated after my father's death. I then went into how she was killed in a car accident one night when I was 15. I was sent to my uncle, ás I didn't have anyone else. He was my father's brother, but I didn't know him. I'd only met him at my father's funeral. I was 5 when my father died, so I didn't remember much about that day.

The first year living with Grant was mostly okay. He had a drinking problem but tried to keep it under control now that I was living with him. He had no kids of his own. He had a string of girlfriends that would be at the house. Sometimes it was a new girl every single day. They would help clean up the house a little. Sometimes they cooked. Most of the time, they just drank with him.

My mom had taught me how to cook, so I ended up doing most of the cooking and cleaning when his drinking became so bad that he was having trouble functioning. He lost his job around the time I had turned 16 and that's when things got bad.

His drinking got infinitely worse, and he started taking out his frustration on me. At first, he just berated me for things that he had broken when he was drunk and didn't remember, but he never hit me. He never yelled at me in front of the women, but sometimes he would get me confused with them and would yell at me like I was one of them. He would call me all kinds of names, like I was a sl*t, a wh*re, how I would end up pregnant, how nobody would ever love me, that kind of stuff.

As his drinking got more out of control, the women stopped coming around. The yelling got worse, and he eventually started hitting me. The first couple of times, he felt h*rrible about it and would go overboard trying to apologize for days after. The first couple of times, he just smacked me, so it didn't really leave a bruise.

His tolerance for alcohol kept increasing, to the point that it was taking massive amounts to get him drunk. That's when he started taking pills. The pills made him violent. I would lock myself in my room when he took them or leave the house altogether. I really didn't know anyone at the time, but I knew I was safer roaming the streets than I was at home. I would walk around or hide until he passed out and then I would sneak back into the house. Sometimes he would sleep for a day or two after he got high, so I had some relief.

I came home a few times, thinking he would be passed out, only to find him still awake and still very high. That's when the beatings got worse. He punched and kicked me. He would always kick me in the stomach, no matter how tight I tried to curl into a ball. Made me pass out a few times.

I knew I needed to get out of there but wasn't sure how. I had a little bit of money from my mom that I had managed to hide from Grant. I started looking for apartments to rent, far away from him. I didn't have a car and he would've killed me for taking his car, so I would ride the bus to the other side of the city. That's how I found my apartment. The landlord must've known that I was in a tight spot because he rented it to me when I was still 17. He didn't ask many questions, either.

That's when I met Ms. Jackson, too. I would take a few things from my uncle's house and leave them at the apartment. I didn't want him to notice that I was moving my stuff, so I had to do it slowly. I didn't have much stuff anyway, which made it easy. Ms. Jackson was nice to me right away. She invited me in for lunch when she saw me bringing more stuff one day. She told me I looked like I hadn't eaten in a week and needed to eat at least a sandwich when I tried to decline her offer.

Each time I showed up, she would feed me. She knew something was going on and that I was in trouble, but she never really asked. I showed up one time with fresh bruises. She didn't ask about them, she just placed a pocketknife in front of me while I was eating. "You take this and keep it on you at all times," she told me. I tried to say no, but she wouldn't take no for an answer. "It's going to come in handy one day," she said.

It was that very night when I got back that I got the scars. Grant was higher than I'd ever seen him and angrier than I'd seen him. He was yelling at me for something he had broken a few days before. I knew better than to talk back to him, but I couldn't help myself. I said something smart to him and he snapped.

I'll never forget the look in his eyes when I talked back to him that night. It's like his eyes went completely black and the person standing in front of me was no longer human.

He grabbed me by my hair and dragged me down the stairs to the basement. I hated the basement. It was creepy, there was hardly any light down there, and it smelled of mildew. There was no reason for me to go down there, so I stayed away.

He dropped me in the middle of the floor and kicked me hard in the stomach, knowing I wouldn't be able to get up after. I curled up into a ball, knowing that more was coming. I heard him, walk to the table and pick something up. When he came back toward me, I was not prepared. He had a whip. He hit me so hard the first time that my shirt tore open and so did my skin. He just kept hitting me over and over. So many times in a row that he was out of breath.

Sometimes when he would beat me, he would get out of breath, and it would give me a chance to get away from him. I was waiting for that moment in the basement. My back was on fire. I was bl*ody. I knew I had to get out of there that night or he was going to kill me. I tried to move and felt something hard in my pocket. The knife that Ms. Jackson had given me. As discreetly as possible, I maneuvered the knife out of my pocket into my hand. I knew I had one chance and only one chance to get away from him.

He walked back toward me and drew his leg back like he was going to kick me. Just when his foot should've made contact with my stomach, I grabbed his foot and sliced his Achilles' tendon with every bit of strength I had left. I needed to make sure he couldn't run after me. He crumpled to the floor, screaming in pain. I used every bit of strength I had left and ran up the stairs. I ran to my room to grab my bag with the last little bit of my stuff in it. I caught my reflection in the mirror and realized I was covered in blood and my back was basically ground chuck. I didn't have time to change, so I grabbed a jacket and threw it on. I screamed when the material touched my back.

Running toward the front door, I saw his car keys. I grabbed them and ran outside. I jumped in his car and d*ove away as fast as possible.

When I d*ove up to my apartment building, I saw Ms. Jackson's lights were still on. I knocked on her door. I didn't know who else to go to, but I needed help. She could at least call an ambulance for me. I didn't even have a phone at the time.

Instead, she took me inside, cleaned me up and stitched me up. She didn't ask me anything other than "did you use the knife?" When I nodded, she said "see, I told you it was going to come in handy one day."

I smiled at the memory of how she helped me that night. How she nursed all my wounds without asking me to relive it. She let me sleep on her couch, as I didn't even have a bed. I slept for a full 24 hours. That was the first time in years that I could actually relax. She kept an eye on me the whole time. She also made a few calls and had a bed delivered to my apartment while I was asleep.

I laughed, telling him she also sold my uncle's car and had the cash for me when I woke up. She said she knew I stole it and it would be the only way he could find me, should he try, so she got rid of it.

Adrik was standing quietly beside me this whole time, listening to my story. I had been avoiding looking at him. It was just easier to get through the story that way. He stood in front of me, taking my hands in his and wrapping my arms around his waist. He then pulled me to him and held me tightly. I rested my head against his chest, inhaling his scent to help me stay calm.

After several minutes in silence, he cupped my face in his large hands, forcing me to look at him. "You are remarkable," he said, hugging me to him once again.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“Sephie

As we walked back toward the house, his fingers laced in mine, he was quiet. I didn’t mind the silence, but I was waiting on the usual change in behavior to happen. I was waiting for the way he looked at me to change.

He looked at me out of the corner of his eye, with that s*xy smirk that I loved. “Bingo is definitely happening,” was all he said as he grinned at me.

It was exactly the thing I needed to hear. I started laughing and wrapped his arm around my shoulders so I could slide my arm around his waist. We walked in silence the rest of the way to the house, but he would periodically peek at me and kiss the top of my head.

Maybe he was going to be different too.

As we came out of the woods, the cl*uds were growing darker above us. Thunder rumbled in the distance and within a few seconds, a flash of lightning lit up the sky. I inhaled deeply, loving the smell of rain.

Adrik stopped and pulled me to him. He kissed me deeply, holding me against him tightly. My knees threatened to give way beneath me. I clung to him to keep from falling as I was caught completely off guard by the passion behind this kiss. My breaths came heavier as he was unrelenting. I felt like he was trying to convince me of his passion in just one kiss. Just when I thought I couldn’t take any more, he kissed my lips softly. He looked deeply into my eyes. I was searching his eyes for the change I was expecting, but I saw nothing different. He looked at me with the same intensity he always had, maybe even a little more.

He kissed the tip of my nose and with an impish grin said, “race you!” as he took off running toward the house.

“Oh, it’s on,” I said taking off after him. He was fast, but so was I and he didn’t have couches to jump this time. On a straightaway, I was pretty fast. I easily caught up to him in a short distance. We still had around 200 yards to the house. He glanced to the side and saw me right at his heels, a wide smile on his face. He tried to speed up, but I was prepared and increased my speed as well, so I stayed right by him. I was expecting him to tire before we reached the house and then I could pass him.

We had maybe 20 yards to go and he started to give out. I easily passed him. Looking back, he had slowed to a walk, trying to catch his breath. I kept jogging the rest of the way to the back patio. I stood waiting for him, looking at my pretend watch the whole time. He was still panting when he finally caught up to me.

“How,” he said, breathlessly. “How are you so fast.”

“Many of those nights I spent away from my uncle’s house were spent running.” I winked at him.

“You’re like a gazelle.”

I laughed at him, still trying to catch his breath. “You okay? Do I need to send for someone to carry you in the house? I don’t think I can do it by myself,” I said as raindrops started to fall.

He was still partially bent over, trying to catch his breath, but he slung one arm around my shoulders and lifted one leg like I was going to pick him up. “Come on, I think you can do it. You almost killed me. it’s the least you can do.”

The rain started to fall harder. I grabbed his hand, pulling him along behind me. “You’re very dramatic for a Lord King Boss.”

As we got under one of the balconies and out of the rain, he suddenly stopped. “Lord King Boss?”

I laughed, “yeah, that was the title I came up with for you the first night we met. I didn’t know who you were or what your title was.”

He thought for a minute. “I like it. It’s authoritative.”

“That’s exactly what I said!” I said dramatically. “Where are Viktor and Andrei? They need to hear this.”

As if he was waiting for me to say his name, Viktor appeared outside. “Boss, you have an important call.”

“Who is it?”

“Salvadori.”

He glanced at me, almost like he was seeking permission to take the call. I knew Salvadori was Anthony’s father. This was important. “Go. I’ll be fine,” I said.

We followed Viktor in the house. Adrik immediately went upstairs to his office, with Viktor. I wandered into the kitchen to get a drink of water. Sprinting makes me thirsty. The house was quiet. Everyone must be in their rooms or gone. I stood in the kitchen, leaning against one of the counters, lost in my head. So much had happened in the last three days.

I heard heavy footsteps coming toward the kitchen. I looked up to see Ivan, Misha, and Stephen walking together, all looking very determined.

“You guys are going to f*ck some sh*t up, aren’t you?” I asked,

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Before they could answer, Viktor and Adrik came into the kitchen from upstairs. Adrik had changed into slacks and an oxford shirt, with the top two buttons unbuttoned. His hair was combed neatly, but he still hadn’t taken the time to shave. His stubble was fast approaching a full beard. I can’t say that I hated it, though. I caught myself looking forward to running my hands over that stubble later.

“Solnishko. Salvadori wants to meet with me,” Adrik said, walking to my side. He took my glass of water from my hand and finished it.

“He’s coming here?” I said, starting to get nervous.

“Net. No one comes here. No one knows here exists and I plan to keep it that way,” he said, refilling my glass of water at the refrigerator. He walked back to me, handing me the full glass of water. “Andrei will stay here with you, just in case,” he said.

“You don’t need him too? You realize there are like 47 guards and at least that many dogs outside, right? I mean, I feel fairly protected.”

He leaned in close, kissing my temple and whispered, “I have a pinky swear to uphold, solnishko.”

1 blushed.

“Stay with Andrei. Please? And do what he says if anything happens,” he said.

I nodded my head and looked up at him, trying to mask the nervousness I was feeling. His hand cupped the side of my face as he pulled me to him and kissed me deeply, in full view of all the guys. Even Andrei, who had just walked into the kitchen was privy to this moment. I was struggling between feeling utterly shy in front of everyone and not wanting to let him go. He pulled away slowly, that intensity in his eyes making them darker than normal.

“Please be careful,” I said.

“Always. We won’t be gone too long. You’ll be safe with Andrei. Pinky swear,” he said as he winked at me before turning to go.

“Wait! Salvadori’s eye twitches when he’s being dishonest. Or when he’s angry,” I said. Adrik raised an eyebrow, but simply nodded as he turned to leave.

Please come back to me, I thought to myself as I watched him walk out of the kitchen, followed by everyone but Andrei.

I looked at Andrei. “Ok, so now what, boss? You’re the babysitter, so what’s on the agenda?”

was going to workout, so you can come with me. It might be boring for you, but I’m supposed to not let you out of my sight until Boss gets back,” he said.

“Ohhh, can I get in on that workout? It’s been like four days since I’ve done anything. Unless you count beating Adrik in a race a little bit ago.” –

“You beat him? Really?” he asked, completely surprised.

I just stared at him for a moment, faking being offended that he didn’t believe me right away. “I’m fast as f*ck, boy.”

He laughed. “Okay, Usain.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Sephie

I ran upstairs to change, while Andrei waited outside my bedroom for me. I traded the jeans for a pair of leggings. I threw on a sports bra and a bigger shirt, to make sure Andrei didn't see anything he shouldn't see. When I came out of my room, he had his back to the door, like the guardian he was. I took the opportunity to jump on his back like a spider monkey. "Onward, trusty steed!" I said pointing ahead of him. He grabbed my legs and bounced me up higher on his back. He walked down the stairs like he wasn't carrying a whole a*s other person on his back.

He turned at the bottom of the stairs and went toward all the guys' rooms. "Ohhh, I haven't been this way yet. It's an adventure!" I said, trying to be as annoying as possible.

As we passed each room, he pointed out who the room belonged to. Like I was going to remember after just one time.

"Will there be a test on this later? Because I can tell you right now that I'm not going to pass that test," I asked.

He laughed. "Net, sestrichka. No test. We will all help you when you get lost. It took me two weeks to remember where everything was when we first moved here."

"That makes me feel so much better."

The gym came after all the guys' bedrooms. It was huge and completely furnished with every weight and machine you would find in a regular gym. There was even a boxing ring at the back wall. Andrei pointed to a door behind the boxing ring. "There's a basketball court through that door."

"Shut up. You guys have a basketball court here?"

"Da. We don't really use it that much. In the winter more. Too hot in the summer."

I looked at him, amazed at this house. "I just can't believe it's not temperature controlled," I said under my breath.

Andrei set me down by the extensive racks of weights. "You do my workout, sestrichka?"

I nodded. I was always up for a challenge. "Please don't kill me."

He chuckled. "I'll go easy."

While we worked out, we talked about everything. I learned about his childhood, how long he'd been working for Adrik, how he got the job, everything.

During a lull in the conversation, I cocked my head to the side and looked at him, "how long have you had a crush on Tori?"

He paused, blushing immediately. "I don't know what you're talking about, Sephie."

"Don't lie to me. It's literally written all over your face right now," I laughed.

He put his dumbbells down and walked to me. He grabbed my arm and pulled me deeper into the gym. "Shhhh…" he said with his finger to his lips.

I looked around. There was no one there but he and I. "Who's going to hear me?" I whispered.

"She comes to the gym sometimes. She could walk in at any minute."

I gasped. "Is that why we're working out right now??"

He nodded.

"You dog," I said slapping his massive bicep.

He looked down, his posture crumbling slightly. "I don't think she notices me. I don't think she likes me."

I scoffed. "Are you blind, son? She might try to hide it, but it's plain as f* cking day that she hearts you," I said holding my hands up in the shape of a heart against my chest.

"No shit?"

"No shit, Andrei. I saw it right away in the kitchen this morning. Even Adrik saw it. You should talk to her. Don't ask her out, just talk to her," I said, now putting my hand gently on his arm. "She notices you, trust me."

He thought for a minute, then shook his head. "I can't. I'm an idiot. I wouldn't know what to say."

"You've been talking to me for like an hour now. You'll do fine. H*ll, you got a marriage proposal out of me within an hour of officially meeting me. You've got more game than you think you do, Andrei."

"You're different, Sephie."

"I am not," I argued. "I'm just like everyone else."

It was his turn to argue. "I beg to differ. You are different. You're the only woman that Adrik has ever brought here. He worries about you when he's not with you. He's forgotten his girlfriend's name before in the past. He wants to keep you safe. He wants you by his side, always. He's never been like this with any other woman I've seen him with. It's like he can't keep himself away from you, like he always has to be touching you. He's never been like that with another woman. They usually cling to him like he's going to run away from them at any moment. But with you, it's like he's constantly trying to run to you. And it was like that from the first moment he saw you. I've worked for him for a long time. I know him. The second he saw you, he was in love with you."

I inhaled deeply, not knowing what to say. I was completely at a loss for words. Some part of me knew he was right, but I still didn't know how to respond. I thought for a moment more and then raised an eyebrow at him, "you're this observant and you still can't tell that Tori likes you as much as you like her?"

He cursed under his breath, blushing.

"Okay, Bubba. I'll make you a deal. How about I talk to Tori and try to feel her out for you first? Find out if there's a chance before you sh*ot your shot?"

"You would do that for me?"

"Bubba," I said, hooking me arm through his, "I was ready to marry you for washing my dishes. Of course, I'll talk to her."

He grinned at me, then hugged me tightly. We finished our workout. He escorted me back to my bedroom so I could shower quickly. Once again, he waited outside my door. And once again, I hopped on his back after I walked out of my room. I could get used to this mode of transportation through this giant house…

I was taken to his room, so he could get a quick shower. He walked out of his bathroom in a fresh pair of sweatpants, holding his shirt in his hands. Good Lord, were they all this chiseled? Tori better jump at the chance to get to know this Adonis better.

He pulled his shirt over his head as he walked to his door. "Come. You hungry?" he asked.

"Now you are speaking my love language," I said standing to follow him. He stopped in his doorway, slightly squatting down, with his arms wide at his side. I immediately jumped on his back, laughing. "Don't tell Viktor. You're my new favorite."

He patted my leg, "your secret is safe with me."

Once in the kitchen, he backed up to the island so I could sit while he rummaged through the refrigerator. He started pulling random things out and setting them on the counter.

"Is there a plan here or are you just so hungry that you'll eat anything?" I asked, eyeing the strange combination of food he had compiled on the counter.

"There's a plan. Trust me."

"If you say so…" I said, still very unsure about what was going to happen next.

He ultimately ended up being a very good cook. It was unorthodox, I'll give him that, but his combination of like six different meats, potatoes, and peppers was delicious. Or I was just so hungry that I would've eaten anything. It could go either way.

Chapter Thirty

Sephie

As we were cleaning up, Tori walked through the kitchen. She looked like she was on her way to the gym, and she stopped to ask, “is there anyone in the gym?”

“Nope,” I said. “Everyone else is gone and we just got done.” I caught her face fall briefly. She looked to Andrei, who was looking down like he was petrified of looking at her directly.

She’s not Medusa, Andrei. I smiled at her, shrugging my shoulders, and jerking my head toward Andrei. She blushed slightly and continued on her way. When she was out of the kitchen, I smacked his arm. “What the h*ll was that? You didn’t even look at her!”

“I get nervous.”

I sighed. I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose. “You can like kill people with just your thumbs, but you’re scared to talk to a girl?”

“Basically.”

I shook my head. “Okay, that’s it. I’m going to talk to her right now. You guys are going to keep playing this game forever unless someone intervenes on your behalf. You can wait outside the gym,” I said, walking back toward the gym.

As we got closer, he started to get more nervous. “Are you sure this is a good idea right now? I mean, we could wait until later. It might not be a good time. We should wait.”

“Nope. We’re ripping this band-aid off right now,” I said, opening the door to the gym. “Wait here.”

As I walked in, Tori was just finishing her warm-up on the treadmill. She gave me a small smile, but she was looking past me to see if Andrei was going to follow me into the gym. I glanced behind me, following her gaze, to make sure he was waiting outside.

“Hi Tori,” I said walking up to her.

“Hi,” she said somewhat unsure of what I was doing there.

“Okay, so this is weird and I’m just going to come out and say it. Andrei really likes you, but he’s also terrified of you. He wants to talk to you, to get to know you, but he’s so scared that you’ll turn him down that he won’t let himself even look at you, which is why he acts like a buffoon anytime you’re around.”

Her eyes went wide in shock. “He does???”

“He does. He very much does. And I’m guessing from what I saw this morning that you do too?”

She nodded eagerly. “I’ve had such a major crush on him since I started here. The other guys are so intimidating, but Andrei just seems really genuine. I didn’t think he liked me though because he rarely looks at me.

I crossed my arms, “terrified.”

She laughed nervously, “I can understand. I’m mostly terrified of him too. All of them, really. They’re so serious all the time. This morning was the first time I’ve ever seen any of them smile and I’ve worked here for two years. Especially Ivan. He’s scary, but he was like a normal guy with you.”

“Eh, a normal guy that can kill you in 2 seconds. Clearly normal is relative with him.”

“I’ve never seen any of them act so relaxed before. Especially Boss. He’s always uptight and looks like he wants to punch the wall. We have a stockpile of punching bags for him because he breaks them frequently.”

“Seriously?” I asked, completely surprised.

“Yeah. Me and the rest of the staff thought he had anger issues or something. And we’ve never seen him with a woman. The house staff thinks he’s gay.”

I laughed, “he did tell me that.”

We were silent for a moment. Then I came up with an idea. “Ok, I have a plan. You’re supposed to cook dinner for everyone tonight?” She nodded. “How about, I do that and give you time with Andrei, just the two of you. He’s supposed to be babysitting me, until everyone returns, but that doesn’t mean you guys can’t be in the next room without five other pairs of eyes on you for once.”

She looked shocked. “You would do that? No, I can’t ask you to do that.”

“You’re not asking. I offered. We have a unique opportunity tonight, might as well take advantage of it, no?”

“Oh my gosh, thank you so much. You’re seriously awesome,” she said.

“It’s a gift,” I winked at her. “I’ll tell the buffoon and coach him on speaking publicly until you’re ready,” I said, walking toward the door.

Andrei was going to be so happy. And nervous. So nervous.

Chapter Thirty-One

Adrik

We left the house in three vehicles. Ivan and Viktor with me, Stephen and Misha each driving a separate vehicle. Sometimes I showed up in two, sometimes three. I wasn't entirely sure what I was walking into, so we chose three vehicles. Since we were coming back to the house and not staying in the city, I wanted to make sure no one followed us. We could confuse any tails we had easier with more vehicles.

Salvadori had asked to meet me, to discuss his son. He started off by apologizing for him and said he had a plan that he felt would satisfy everyone. I was sure it would, in fact, not satisfy me but I would hear him out, nonetheless.

We pulled up in front of Salvadori's house. The other bosses loved to show their wealth, so he had a giant fountain in his driveway and usually kept one or two sports cars parked in his driveway. Today, it was the Porsche and Bugatti. Nice cars, but I didn't understand the need for multiple cars that no one ever drives. If you're going to own one, you might as well drive it.

We were met at the front door by Salvadori's head of security. A man named Andy. He was a mostly good man. He had worked for Salvadori for years. Salvadori didn't know it was Andy that had first alerted me to Anthony's dealings with human trafficking. He said he couldn't stand that Anthony was "soiling the family name" by stooping to such a low level. Since then, he's been my mole in Salvadori's operation. Unfortunately, even Salvadori doesn't know everything that Anthony has been up to. He can't control his own son and that is going to bite him later.

"Andy," I said as I spread my arms wide so he could pat me down for weapons.

"Sir, good to see you again," he said. That meant he had no new information for me. If he said it had been a while since he's seen me, then he had information I would be interested in. Andy patted down both Viktor and Ivan, as they would accompany me inside. Stephen and Misha stayed armed and stayed outside with the vehicles. They all had wireless earpieces so they could communicate with one another. Misha and Stephen would be ready in the event we needed to leave in a hurry.

I wasn't expecting trouble, but I was always prepared for it. Salvadori was a smart man. He knew his place within my organization and appeared happy with his slice of the city. He was active in his community, as well as loved by the people in his area of the city. He had a good relationship with the other bosses of the city. The issue remained, however, that he was incapable of controlling his son and that needed to be rectified.

Andy escorted us through the house to the back patio. Salvadori was seated at a table; his grandchildren were playing in the pool. I relaxed slightly. This was a sign that he meant no harm. We were criminals, but we had a hard and fast rule of no harm coming to children intentionally. Ever. This is why Anthony's foray into human trafficking was unforgiveable.

Salvadori stood and extended his arms, exclaiming, "welcome, Sir. Welcome to my home. I'm pleased you have come."

I shook his hand, nodding once. I was a man of few words, whenever possible. I noticed early in life that it tended to make others say more than they should. Most people were uncomfortable with silence and would fill it however they could, spilling secrets in the process.

He motioned for me to sit, as he took his seat once again. Once seated, he began immediately, "My sincerest apologies for the disrespect my son has caused. He has always been a difficult child, with his own ideas of right and wrong. His mother spoiled him to the point of ruin, I'm afraid," he said, making the sign of the cross as he talked about his late

wife.

I remained silent, allowing him to finish. Viktor and Ivan stood behind me, keeping an eye on our surroundings.

Salvadori continued, "I believe I have a plan that will satisfy everyone. I want to keep my son safe, difficult as he is, but I recognize that he is out of control at the moment. I propose to send him to Sicily. I have a brother there who can watch him and keep him out of trouble. He can stay there until this rebellious time passes. He's young, coming into his manhood. Hormones and what not." He flipped his hand in the air, like that was a suitable explanation for his son's behavior.

I inhaled, thinking about this "solution." My reach in Sicily was minimal, at best. I'm sure that Salvadori knew this, which is why he picked Sicily. It was one place that I couldn't easily reach Anthony. I felt my anger threaten to rise to the surface. I didn't like this plan. I would much rather see that piece of trash dead.

"He goes to Sicily immediately. He is not to return here without my permission. If I catch him in this city, he will be a dead man. The entire city will have shoot on sight orders for him. Understood?"

Salvadori's left eye twitched, just as Sephie had said, but he nodded his head in agreement. I couldn't shake the feeling that something still felt off about this situation. I didn't like it, but I didn't know why yet. Was he being dishonest or was he angry?

"Your tax will be increased for two years, as well. 40%. Take it from Anthony, I don't care."

His eyes went wide in shock, but he immediately gained control of his reaction once again. "Of course, sir. That's very reasonable. I will make sure Anthony leaves within the week."

"He has two days."

"Yes, sir," Salvadori said. He looked to Andy and nodded his head, waving his hand toward the table. "Now, please, I have a gift for the lovely Sephie. A token of apology from an old man."

Andy set a jewelry box in front of me on the table. I opened it to reveal a diamond tennis bracelet. It was beautiful, but I couldn't imagine her wanting to wear it. I still had that feeling that something was off, but graciously accepted the gift on her behalf. I stood to shake Salvadori's hand and followed Andy back through the house. As we walked through the front door, Andy looked to the sky. The spring storm from earlier had passed, but the sky was still slightly overcast. "Looks like it might rain again, sir. Be careful on your drive home."

I nodded my head. We got in the vehicles and drove away from the house in silence. Instead of turning to go back to my house, we turned in the opposite direction to drive back into the city.

"Penthouse, sir?" Ivan confirmed.

"Da. Something is off. I don't like this," I said, turning the jewelry box over in my hands.

"Agreed," both Viktor and Ivan said.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Adrik

It took us twice as long to get to the penthouse as usual. We basically drove in circles for at least 20 minutes, trying to make sure we weren't being followed. When Ivan was satisfied we were safe, we pulled into the underground parking garage beneath the building. I owned the entire building. The bottom floors were office space and apartments. The top three floors were restricted, with only my people having access. The top floor was my penthouse, the floor beneath that was apartments for each of my men, and the floor beneath that was office space for me, gym, and secure rooms where I could keep anyone I needed to get information from.

Andy's statement about the weather told me that something was off, but I couldn't get details just yet. It confirmed my gut feeling that I was missing something.

We rode the elevator to my office. I wanted to look through my files in my office. I threw the jewelry box down on my desk as I sat and started leafing through files on my desk. I wasn't exactly sure what I was looking for, but I knew I would know it when I saw it. I needed as much information on Salvadori's brother as I could find.

After half an hour with still no luck, I called to Viktor. He stuck his head inside my office, "Yes, boss?"

"I think we should take the helicopter home. I still have a bad feeling."

"I already called it, sir. It'll be here in ten minutes, ready whenever you are."

"Thank you, Viktor." I smiled to myself, knowing they were already taking every precaution to keep us safe and protected, which ultimately meant that Sephie would also be safe and protected. She had been on my mind the entire afternoon. I was still in shock over what she had endured in her short life. She had every reason to be hateful, to be mad at the world, to see the evil in everything and everyone. Instead, she was exactly the opposite. She practically exuded love and happiness. She had moments where her past would show up and her light would dim, but only briefly. She was incredibly strong. I was in awe of her. The more I learned about her, the deeper I was falling for her.

I stood up from my desk. It was time to go. I needed to feel her in my arms.

Sephie

When I came out of the gym, Andrei was facing the door, looking more nervous than a man of his size ever should. I chuckled. He raised his eyebrows, looking expectantly at me. "So…?"

I pointed both of my thumbs at my chest and asked, "who's your favorite?"

He inhaled sharply, "she's interested??"

"Bubba, she's just as smitten with you as you are with her. She's had a crush on you since she got here. Thank God I stepped in. You two would be in your 60s before you ever had a conversation about this." I grabbed his hand, walking back down the hall toward his bedroom. "We're waiting in here until she leaves the gym. I need to have a coaching session with you on how to talk to girls anyway. Then, you and she are spending time together, alone, while I cook dinner for everyone."

"But sestrichka, I can't leave you alone until Boss returns."

"I'll be in the next room. You can even move the couches so I'm in your line of sight. It'll be fine. I'll tell Adrik that it was my idea, so he doesn't yell at you. Come on, you have like one chance to be alone with her, so fucking take it," I said as I pointed my finger at him.

He laughed as he shook his head at me. "Yes, ma'am."

After we heard Tori walk past his door, we ventured out toward the kitchen again. As we walked by the doors to the back patio, I had an idea.

"Do you have a pocketknife?"

"Da. Why?" he asked, reaching into his pocket to produce his knife. He held it in his palm.

I grabbed it, then grabbed his arm, pulling him after me. "Come with me. I have an idea."

"I don't like your ideas when you're armed. Misha was right. You're feisty."

I stopped and glared at him for a moment, then smiled, "that's fair. Totally fair."

We walked to the garden. I waved my hand toward the flowers and said, "pick one. Don't think too hard about it. Pick the one that catches your eye first."

He immediately walked to a rose bush. The roses were a mix of yellow, orange, and pink. It was beautiful and unique.

"These are my favorite. Don't tell anyone."

I smiled at him, "you're a secret romantic. I love it." I used his knife to cut one of the biggest flowers off the bush and handed it to him. "Now, you're ready."

He took the rose from me. He did not look ready. He still looked terrified. I felt bad for laughing at him, but it was such a funny picture. This huge man that has likely killed people and not thought twice about it was having a full-blown panic attack about talking to a woman. A woman who was clearly into him as much as he was into her. This shouldn't be an issue, but alas. Here we were.

"Andrei, look at me." He glanced up at me, fear still evident in his eyes. "Talk to her like you talk to me. I'm no different. Think of her like you think of me. Instead of jumping straight into her pants, think about being friends with her first. I know you like her, and she likes you, but you guys don't really know each other yet. Start with that. That's the easy part. Don't overcomplicate things or you'll end up making yourself crazy. You know, like you're clearly doing right now."

He exhaled loudly. "You're like my relationship coach now."

I chuckled and jumped on his back. "Your relationship coach spider monkey that needs a ride to the house."

"Well, since I'm your favorite now, I guess I can oblige."

As he walked us to the house, I said, "I must take advantage of this while I can. If you actually start dating Tori, I won't be able to do this anymore." I hugged his neck a little tighter.

"You can do this no matter what, sestrichka," he said patting my leg.

I sighed, "we'll see, Bubba. We'll see."

Once we got back to the house, we went to the kitchen and I started to rummage through the refrigerator to look for ideas to cook for dinner. As I was looking through the extra-large refrigerator, Andrei was laying down the ground rules for the evening.

"You must stay within my sight. You're my responsibility, so you must stay in the kitchen where I can see you."

"I promise I will follow the rules while giving you two as much distance as I can. Don't worry about me," I said while opening a drawer full of knives. I waved my hand over the top of the drawer, "I've got weapons and I know how to use them."

He chuckled. "That's my girl," he said, holding his palm up for a high five. I smacked his palm and went back to looking through the kitchen.

Tori walked into the kitchen shortly after. They exchanged pleasantries and walked into the next room, Andrei positioning himself on one of the couches so he could still see me while Tori timidly sat down next to him.

I busied myself working on dinner, trying not to watch them the whole time. I would glance into the room every now and then. Every time I did, Andrei was smiling. His gaze would switch between Tori and me frequently. I did feel bad for Tori. This wasn't exactly fair to her that he had to pay attention to me while he should be paying attention to her. At least it seemed like it was going well. He's managed to speak to her, so that's progress.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Sephie

I was in my own little world, working on dinner, humming to myself, sometimes dancing to a tune in my head, but mostly really trying to listen to what was being said in the next room while not being obvious about it. She hadn’t slapped him and stormed out of the room yet, so I was taking that as a good sign. I turned around to wash a knife in the sink, glancing in the direction of the front of the housé,

Adrik was leaning against the doorway to the kitchen, still out of sight of Andrei. I immediately grinned at him. I quickly glanced at Andrei, who was now fully paying attention to something Tori was saying. I motioned for Adrik to be quiet, but to look toward the back room. Just then, the rest of the boys walked in behind Adrik. I motioned for all of them to be quiet and to look toward Andrei and Tori.

They each quietly peeked around the corner to spy on Andrei. There was discussion amongst them, but it was quiet enough that I couldn’t hear it.

Adrik, smirking, pointed to me and then pointed in front of him, signaling me to come to him. With one quick glance toward Andrei, who still wasn’t paying attention to me, I ran quickly to Adrik’s open arms. As soon as I was with him, they all dispersed and hid in various places. Adrik pulled me with him, his finger over his m outh to keep me quiet. He took me to a spot under the giant staircase in the entryway. He pressed me to the wall, his body pressed against mine. He whispered, “I’ve been waiting to do this,” as he pressed his lips to mine. “But first we must scare Andrei.”

“Don’t be mad at him,” I whispered back. “It was all my idea. Technically I put him up to this, because Lord knows he never would’ve made a move without me.”

He smiled at me. “I’m not mad, solnishko. The opposite, really. But he doesn’t need to know that right now.”

My smile grew wide. I loved seeing this impish side of him. I couldn’t help but think back to what Tori had said about him earlier. This was clearly not a man who had anger issues. I was happy I got to see this side of him.

We heard Andrei in the kitchen, calling for me. He cursed and yelled my name again. When he walked toward the front of the house, the other guys came out from their hiding places as he walked past them. We could hear them all jump on him, poor Andrei yelling and cursing each one of them.

Adrik stayed pressed up against me, his eyes never leaving my face. I looked in his eyes, still expecting to see a change. He raised his eyebrow and asked, “why do you look confused, solnishko?”

I looked down, not realizing I had given myself away. I felt my cheeks blush. “It’s nothing.”

He clicked his tongue, but let it drop. He leaned down and pressed his lips to mine. The guys were laughing now, “Come, we will witness the aftermath of the carnage.”

“Ohhh, I love good carnage in the evening,” I said clapping my hands.

When we appeared from our hiding spot, Andrei’s face was so red I was worried he was going to have a heart attack. He caught sight of me, “you’re going to be the death of me!”

I tried to look as innocent as possible. “Tomorrow is never promised, Bubba. You have to seize the opportunities when they arise,” I grinned at him.

The other guys all laughed, walking back toward the kitchen. Andrei looked toward Adrik, still worried he was in trouble. Adrik held his hand up saying, “she already told me she basically forced you to do it. You were fighting a losing battle.” He patted Andrei on his shoulder. “Go. All is well.”

Andrei exhaled and smiled at me, before turning to quickly return to Tori. I turned to Adrik. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For not yelling at him.” I paused, then added, “for coming back to me…and for not looking at me differently.”

He closed the short distance between us and held me close. “Why would I ever look differently at you, Persephone?”

I caught my breath. He was really the only one that ever used my full name, and I loved the way it sounded rolling off his tongue. I looked at him, somewhat sheepishly. “It happens almost every time someone finds out about…you know, my scars.”

He inhaled sharply. He started to speak but stopped. He just wrapped his arms tighter around me and held my head against his chest. He exhaled. “Never.”

hugged him a little bit tighter, wondering to myself how I deserved him. Then I remembered I was supposed to be cooking dinner.

“Oh shit. Dinner.” I ran quickly into the kitchen to find Tori keeping a watchful eye over the food, while Andrei stood close by, keeping a watchful eye on her.

“Oh, thank you, Tori. I got…distracted,” I said glancing back at Adrik.

“I should be thanking you,” she quietly said, blushing slightly. I looked around the kitchen. It was just the two of them.

The guys had all disappeared again.

“I will help her finish this up. You’ve done plenty tonight,” Andrei said with a wink.

“Are you sure? I don’t mind finishing up. I like to cook. I’m nowhere near as good as Tori, but I enjoy it anyway.”

I felt Adrik slide his arm around my waist from behind me. “Why don’t we give them a little more time. I have something to discuss with you anyway,” he said, pulling me out of the kitchen. Andrei simply waved as I disappeared.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Sephie

Adrik took me to his bedroom. As he closed the door, he untucked his shirt from his pants. He walked to me as he unbuttoned his shirt. I sat on the end of the bed, enjoying the show. With his signature smirk, he leaned down and kissed me as he took his shirt completely off. He stood and disappeared in his closet.

“What did you want to discuss with me?” I asked loud enough that he could hear in his closet.

He didn’t answer right away. He walked out in a pair of jeans that looked well worn. He left them unbuttoned, so they were sitting lower than usual on his hips, giving me an almost complete view of that lower ab V that he had. I inhaled sharply, biting my bottom lip without realizing I was doing it. He threw his t-shirt on a dresser and walked to the end of the bed, directly in front of me. He pulled me up, so I was standing in front of him. He took one of my hands and placed it behind his neck, doing the same with my other hand. He ran his hands down my back to my ass. In one quick motion, he picked me up and wrapped my legs around him. I squealed and held on tighter. My hips were just above his, which meant he was eye level to my boobs. He pressed his face into my chest, mumbling, “I could get used to this.”

I laughed, trying to wiggle away from his face in between my breasts. One hand slid under my shirt and up my back. I froze for an instant as his hand touched my bare skin. There had not been many people to actually touch my back since I had been scarred. He noticed my uneasiness. His hand stopped moving, but he didn’t remove it. His thumb just traced small circles while he held his hand against my back. I was fighting to remain calm. His warm hand felt amazing against my skin, but I was so self-conscious that I couldn’t completely relax. I was so used to keeping that part of myself locked away tight.

“Look at me, Sephie,” he said, barely above a whisper. I looked into his eyes. His eyes were dark blue again. I searched his eyes, looking for the slightest change, but still found nothing. He was looking at me just as intensely as he always had. As I was looking at him, his hand started moving across my scars again.

“Keep looking at me, Sephie. Breathe,” he said, gently running his hand up and down my back. I exhaled, not realizing I was holding my breath. Still holding me, he climbed on the bed so that I was now lying underneath him. He brushed a strand of hair from my face, his other hand still on the bare skin of my back. “I missed you today,” he said, placing small kisses down my neck to my collarbone.

I felt tears threatening to well up in my eyes. I felt a massive wave of relief come over me. I sighed, closing my eyes. I felt his lips on mine. I could feel him holding back, unsure of my mental state. As soon as his lips touched mine, I wrapped myself around his body. I kissed him like he was the air I needed to breathe.

He responded in kind. Groaning into my mouth, his hands started to roam freely over my body, exploring every inch. My breathing quickened when he unbuttoned my jeans. He pulled on them to undo the zipper, his fingers immediately tracing lightly across the top of my panties. I felt his fingers slide inside the fabric, sliding lower between my legs. I moaned quietly as I broke the kiss, needing air. He moved to my neck, biting me lightly as his hand fully slid into my wetness.

He groaned, “fuck, Sephie.” His fingers traced lightly back and forth, causing me to moan and push my hips into him. He added more pressure but kept up the back and forth. My hips moving with his motions. His lips pressed to mine again. I kissed him deeply. As I felt his tongue push into my mouth, he slid a finger inside me. He slid his finger out and then added a second as he went back in. I arched my back and moaned louder. He kept a steady rhythm with his hand, my hips moving against him. He kept his mouth on mine as he pushed me closer to the edge. As I got closer, I pushed into him harder. He increased his rhythm, driving me wild. It didn’t take long before my body exploded into pure bliss.

He slowly slid his fingers out of me, causing my body to jerk slightly. He smiled before kissing my neck once more. He brought his fingers to his lips and sucked my juices off his fingers. I covered my face in embarrassment. He pulled my shirt up and kissed my stomach. “You taste heavenly, solnishko. I want more,” he said as he bit my hip bone. “But first, we must eat dinner. Otherwise, I won’t be able to hear your sweet moans over your stomach growling.”

I laughed. Looking up at him, I reached up and traced my fingers lightly over his almost beard. He leaned into my touch, kissing my palm before letting me continue. “I missed you today too,” I said. “Wait, didn’t you say you had something to discuss with me?”

He chuckled. “We just discussed it. We’ll have to revisit it again later, though, as we couldn’t come up with a solid solution.” He sat up on his knees, rolling me on my side. He slapped my ass once before climbing off the bed.

“Come, I’m hungry. Let’s go ruin Andrei and Tori’s time together,” he said as he pulled on his shirt.

“Diabolical. I love it.” I jumped off the bed, straightening my clothes. I reached up to pull my hair into a bun, as I was` sure it was even more of a mess than usual.

He chcked his tongue and pulled my arms down. “I love your hair wild and untamed.”

I smiled at him, still wondering what I did to deserve him, as we started downstairs to the kitchen.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Sephie

We walked in to find Ivan and Misha in the kitchen with Tori and Andrei. Misha was telling Tori stories about Andrei while she finished up dinner. She looked mostly relaxed, especially given that Ivan was in his usual quiet, murderous mood. I walked up behind him and wrapped my arms around his shoulders. I whispered “murderous aura” in his ear.

“Humph,” was all he said.

“That reminds me, Grumplestiltskin. I need to change your bandage later,” I said grabbing a glass from the cabinet. I filled it with water, drank half, and then gave the rest to Adrik. He finished the rest of it and refilled it.

Viktor came into the kitchen, soon followed by Stephen. Misha was still having fun telling stories on Andrei, so he recruited Viktor for more embellishment. Poor Andrei. It was like having four older brothers. Tori seemed to thoroughly enjoy it. She seemed much more at ease with all of them than I had seen her previously. I leaned against the cabinet, smiling.

I felt Adrik’s hand on my back. He kissed my temple. “What are you smiling about, solnishko?” he whispered, lightly rubbing his nose on my ear. I felt the goosebumps spread over my body.

I turned to look at him. “I’m enjoying watching everyone relax. You guys were very uptight the first time I saw you. It’s nice to see this side of everyone.”

He pressed his mouth close to my ear again, so that his rough facial hair brushed against my cheek. “It’s because of you, you know.”

I leaned my face against his as he gently rubbed his rough cheek against mine. My lips curled into a slight smile, thinking back to his hands on me. I felt my cheeks flush. I rested my head on his shoulder, as I felt his hand slip under my shirt. His thumb lightly tracing circles on my back again. My back was toward the wall, so there was no chance anyone would see anything. I sighed, turning my head to watch everyone in the kitchen as they all continued to chat.

The last three days had been anything but normal, but I found myself feeling happy. Really, truly happy for the first time in a very long time. Maybe I wasn’t cut out for normal.

After dinner, all the guys pitched in to help clean up the dishes. Andrei and Tori snuck away outside to go for a walk before the sun set completely. Adrik and Viktor were having a seemingly serious conversation in the corner of the kitchen. They were speaking Russian, which meant I wouldn’t be able to understand even if I wanted to.

I was wiping down the counters as Ivan was finishing drying the last of the dishes. “So, you want to tell me why you’re so grumpy again?”

“I’m not grumpy.”

“You’re definitely grumpy.”

“I am no…I held my hand up to him so he couldn’t finish his sentence.

“Did you just think about punching me for arguing with you?”

“Maybe.”

I crossed my arms across my chest. “I rest my case, your honor.”

He grumbled something under his breath and went to the back room to sit on the end of the couch. I followed. I draped myself over his shoulders, like dead weight on his back.

“Princess. What are you doing?” he said, starting to get even more annoyed.

“I’m your emotional support sloth. I’m staying here until you feel better,” I said, still laying over his back like a wet towel.

He stood up, to try to get rid of me, but I managed to hold on and stay on his back, staying as limp and awkward as I could. He just stood by the couch, with his arms crossed. Misha walked in the room, “what the fuck is going on here?”

“Oh, hi. I’m Grumplestiltskin’s emotional support sloth. I’m just gonna hang out here until he feels better. Should be any minute now. I can feel it,” I said starting to laugh at the absurdity of my antics.

Once I started to laugh, Ivan started to crack. He craned his neck to look at me. I saw him fighting a smile Misha was laughing and Viktor and Adrik had walked into the room to see what was going on. They both laughed at the r*diculous scene in front of them. That was all it took. Ivan couldn’t hold it in any longer. He started laughing.

I jumped off his back and threw my hands up in victory. “Emotional support sloth for the win!”

Ivan just shook his head. He surprised me by turning around and hugging me to him. He held me tightly, in that way that someone who is fighting internal battles does when they find an anchor to cling to in their stormy sea. I hugged him back as he whispered “thank you” in my ear. I just squeezed him tighter.

“I still need to change your bandage,” I said, pulling away to look at his face. He nodded, as he let me go. If I didn’t know better, I would say his eyes were a little misty.

Viktor said, “we have bandages. I’ll get them for you,” as he walked out of the room.

Adrik walked up and pulled me away slightly. “I’m going to my office. I’m still looking for an answer that I can’t seem to find. Come get me when you’re done,” he said as he kissed my lips.

“I won’t be long,” I said.

“Good. There is that matter we still must discuss,” he said. He winked at me as he walked away. I could feel the heat between my legs return at the thought of it.

Ivan stood in front of me, shirtless, standing completely still as I carefully peeled his old bandage off. I was becoming convinced he was completely impervious to pain, as he never even flinched at the adhesive peeling back from his skin.

I worked in silence, checking that his stitches were still holding. Once I was satisfied that no infection was starting to set in and everything was healing like it was supposed to, I placed a new bandage over the wound. As I taped the new bandage to his skin, I said, “you know the trick about fighting demons?” I didn’t wait for him to respond. “The trick is to stop fighting them and make friends with them. Then they have no power over you.”

I noticed his jaw clench, but he didn’t say a word. He looked down at the floor, his shoulders slightly slumped.

Chapter Thirty–Six

Sephie

I cleaned up and left the bandage supplies on the counter. Everyone had since disappeared, so I wasn't sure where they went. I wandered up the stairs to Adrik's office. I was chewing on my bottom lip when I walked in, my hands in my pockets. I was completely lost in thought. About Ivan, about Andrei and Tori, about everything that happened the last three days.

"You okay?" Adrik asked from his desk.

As soon as I saw him, I was snapped back to reality. I smiled warmly at him, taking in his features. He had ditched his shirt again and was just in jeans sitting at his desk, a stack of papers in front of him. He leaned back in his chair, pushing it away from his desk. He turned toward me as I walked toward him.

"Did you find your answer?" I asked, standing beside him, and picking at the top few files in one stack.

He shook his head no, letting out a frustrated breath.

"I can come back later. I don't want to interrupt."

A smile came over his face. "Give me twenty more minutes? This is really eating at me."

"Of course," I leaned down and kissed him, before turning to leave. I heard him blow out another frustrated breath and curse quietly as I walked out.

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I found the shirt he was wearing earlier on the end of the bed, so I decided to change into that and lie down while I waited for him to finish. Between the sprinting and Andrei the personal trainer today, I was tired. My body was going to be sore tomorrow.

I went to the bathroom. I checked my bruises in the mirror. They were still clearly visible, but they were starting to fade just a little. A few more days and they would be much lighter.

I climbed into bed, thinking I was just going to comfortably wait for him to be done. I woke up sometime later. It was completely dark outside. The only light coming from his office. I got up to go check on him, not even sure what time it

was.

When I walked to the door of his office, he was hunched over his desk, pouring over a file. I hesitated, not knowing whether I should interrupt him when he looked like he might've found his answer. Or at least gotten closer. I leaned on the doorway, rubbing my eyes. When I opened them, he had caught sight of me.

"Solnishko. Forgive me. I came in to find you were already asleep, so I came back in here," he said, leaning back in his chair and turning toward me again. He had changed into pajama pants but kept his hatred for shirts alive and well.

"Why would I need to forgive you? You're working. You have a lot of responsibility. I can't be mad at that," I said, walking toward him. He motioned for me to come to him. As I stepped closer to him, he pulled me onto his lap, so that I was straddling him.

"You're so different," he said. His hands immediately running over my legs and under my shirt.

"Different like 'she might be touched in the head' different?" I asked, in my best southern accent.

He laughed. "All of the women I've dated in the past hated when I worked. They always complained when I worked or tried to distract me from it. It made me want to work more to avoid them. You? You try not to bother me, even though I want nothing more than for you to bother me. I want to ditch work, just to be with you. It was torture to have to be away from you today. I've never felt that way about any woman before."

I felt the goosebumps rising on my skin as I listened to his words and his hands continued to roam under my shirt. I didn't really know how to respond. I chewed on my bottom lip, trying to come up with words.

I heard him groan low. His thumb swiped my bottom lip as he said, "you know what that does to me, solnishko."

I grinned at him. I yawned suddenly, still not completely awake, and stretched. "Did you find your answer?"

"Da. Finally," he said, as he stood up, with me still straddling him. I just wrapped myself around him as he turned the light off and walked us to the bedroom.

"What time is it?" I asked, yawning again.

"Around 2, I think," he said as he placed me gently on the bed. I moved over so he could climb in behind me. He pulled me back to him, pressing his body against mine.

I sighed, "you're so warm."

"Too warm?"

"No, perfect warm," I said as I drifted off to sleep again.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Adrik

I heard her inhale deeply and felt her body stretch against mine. It must be morning. I was not ready to wake up yet. I pulled her closer to me and she snuggled back into my arms. She rolled in my arms to face me, her fingers lightly running through my facial hair. I loved when she ran her fingers over my face. I kept my eyes closed, still not wanting to admit that it was morning.

I felt her lips gently brush mine as she whispered, “good morning.” Her fingers still in my facial hair.

I groaned and squeezed her tighter, hiding my face in the pillow. She giggled quietly, running her fingers through my hair and down the back of my neck. I buried my face deeper into the pillow as she ran her hands down my back. She rested her chin on the back of my shoulder, giving her better access to rub my back. It felt amazing. I’d been so stressed since my meeting with Salvadori that I hadn’t paid attention to how tight my muscles were.

She would alternate between the light pressure of just her fingertips and using her whole hand to press on my muscles, working the tightness out as she went. I felt goosebumps on my body as she kissed the back of my shoulder. I rolled onto my side, as my morning wood was making it uncomfortable to lie on my stomach. She laid her head on my arm and looked at me sweetly. Her hand continued to run lightly over my chest and arms.

“How did you sleep?” I asked, brushing a curl back from her face.

“It seems I always sleep well with you,” she said. She stretched her body again, this time several joints popping loudly in the process. She groaned quietly.

I raised my eyebrow at her. “I’m a little sore,” she said. My eyebrows furrowed, wondering why she would be sore.” “Between racing you yesterday and Andrei the personal trainer, my muscles are complaining this morning,” she said.

“Andrei didn’t take it easy on you?” I asked.

“No, he did. This is the problem. It’s been too long since I worked out. I used to go to the gym with Max sometimes after work, but I had skipped it the week before, uh…” she trailed off, not wanting to say it. She just pointed to her neck. The bruises were slowly getting lighter with each day that passed.

I ran my hands over her arm, down her body to her leg. I pulled her leg over my hip so I could easily run my hand over her leg while we talked. “You can go to the gym anytime you want now, solnishko.”

“I know. I was actually hoping to go for a run today?” she phrased it like a question, like she was asking for permission. I smiled at her. She still didn’t know she could do whatever she pleased, whenever she pleased.

“You can do whatever you please, solnishko. Take Misha with you. He likes to run. He might be able to keep up with you.”

She laughed. “No sprinting today, but it’s been a while since I’ve been for a long run. I miss it.”

“Then I will tell Misha to stretch so he’s ready.” I grinned at her.

She smiled back at me, but her smile faded quickly. She looked like she was struggling internally, like she wasn’t sure how to say something. I leaned over to kiss her lightly. “You know you can say anything that’s on your mind with me. I want to know what’s going on in that beautiful brain of yours.”

She looked at me, slightly surprised. Shyly, she asked, “can I go back to work? I mean, I don’t really miss the job per se, but I miss Max. And I want to check on Ms. Jackson and Mr. Turner.”

I felt a pull in my chest. She’s been so happy here that I almost forgot I took her away from her life. She didn’t realize that she didn’t need to work anymore, because I would take care of every need, or want, she would ever have. I wanted her to be happy. Most of all, I needed to keep her safe. Anthony wasn’t gone yet, but even after he left, I still didn’t trust that he wouldn’t try something.

“Not yet, malishka. Anthony will be gone by tomorrow. I want you to stay here until he’s gone, so I know you are safe,” I said. I saw disappointment flash across her eyes, but she masked it quickly.

“Gone where? Like taking a trip down the river Styx gone?” she asked, her eyes wide.

I smiled at the direction her mind immediately went. “Unfortunately, no. I would prefer that outcome, truth be told. His father made a deal with me. Anthony is banished to Sicily. For now.”

“Taking that island off the list of places I’d like to visit one day,” she said, her face serious. She had handled. everything so well, but she had moments where I could tell she was still bothered by it all. I took a deep breath in, thinking about everything she had been through in a few short years. I watched as her face went dark for a moment, She closed her eyes, holding her breath for a moment. When she opened her eyes, her eyes were light once again.

“You have to work today?” she asked, snuggling closer to my chest, and wrapping her leg tighter around my hips.

“Not if you keep doing that,” I said kissing the top of her head.

I felt the vibration of her giggle against my chest. “Sorry…that’s a lie. Not sorry,” she said.

I ran my hands under my shirt that she was wearing. She didn’t flinch this time when my hands touched her scars. Good. I wanted her to feel comfortable. I wanted her to know that my feelings hadn’t changed. As I ran my hand over her body, I lazily told her what my plans for the day were. “I have some work to finish here this morning. I have meetings in the city this afternoon. I will leave Andrei with you again if you like. Or you can pick another one to abuse in my absence.”

She giggled again. “You don’t have to leave any of them with me, you know. You need them more than me. You said nobody knows about this place, so how would anybody find me here? And if they did find me here, how would they get through the army of guards and dogs outside?”

“I’m leaving one of them with you. No arguing. The guards outside don’t have the…special set of skills that my guys have. You’re stuck with one of them. But I’ll let you choose which one,” I said.

“Should we let them choose? I feel like it’s punishment for them to have to babysit me, so I don’t want to force them to have to do it.”

I laughed at her. “This is a good idea. Then you’ll see that it is definitely not punishment to stay with a beautiful woman instead of following my grumpy ass around all day.” I held her close, not wanting to get up. Not wanting this moment to end. As soon as we got out of bed, my day would start and I already knew that I would be counting the mynutes until I could get back to her.

We laid in silence for a few more minutes. She sighed and rolled away from me slightly. “I should go get dressed,” she said, stretching her arms over her head.

“You can move your things in here. There’s plenty of room,” I said as she sat up.

She looked back at me. “But then it won’t be so easy to kick me out when you get annoyed with me and my smart mouth,” she said, a devilish grin on her face.

I sat up beside her. I looked at her very seriously. “Solnishko. I wouldn’t kick you out. You would just have to sleep on the floor,” I said as I jumped out of bed before she could smack me. I heard her laughing as I went to the bathroom, closing the door.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Adrik

Everyone was in the kitchen when we came downstairs. Tori was making breakfast for everyone, as usual. The house staff was back and walking through the kitchen now that it was a weekday. I gave them the weekends off. I always offered Tori the weekend off as well, but she always refused. Now I understand it was because she wanted to be close to Andrei.

Misha was already ready for his run with Sephie. The other guys ready for their workouts after breakfast. Mornings were the only chance we had to get any kind of exercise in. My schedule was always full, especially in the afternoons.

After breakfast, Misha and Sephie left for their run. I was happy to see her happy. I felt bad for Misha. He had no idea what he was in for with my gazelle.

The rest of us went to the gym. Some days we worked out in silence. Other days, we discussed business. We rarely talked about anything else, but today we were very interested in grilling Andrei about his evening with Tori. It was obvious during breakfast that she was much more comfortable with all of us, but especially Andrei. I caught him finding reasons to touch her while we were in the kitchen.

Andrei and Misha were the most sensitive of all the guys. Andrei was young, but not as young as Misha. He was good at his job, though, and could turn everything off and rely on his instincts when it counted. He'd been with me in a few close calls, including a few days ago with getting Sephie here.

When we were done giving Andrei a hard time about Tori, I posed a question to all of them. "Sephie wishes to return to work. I can't say I'm happy about that idea, but I want her to be happy. Is it possible to keep her safe while she's at work?"

They all stopped and thought for a moment. Ivan was the first to speak. "Net. Not a good idea. There's too many variables. All of us would need to be there, which leaves you vulnerable."

Viktor agreed. "I don't like the idea either. You saw how many people were in the restaurant the other night. That's too many innocent people to have to consider."

"She told me this morning that she misses her friend Max that she worked with and her neighbors," I said.

Ivan asked, "are you planning to keep her here full-time? Why not take her to your penthouse. Move the neighbors into the apartments on the lower floors. She can see Max whenever she wishes. That'll keep her neighbors out of trouble too. I wouldn't put it past Anthony to plan an attack on the building if he thought it would get to her." "Ivan, you're brilliant. I'll arrange everything this morning. She's not to know about this yet, though."

They all nodded in agreement. Andrei smiling at the thought of surprising her with this.

Viktor surprised me and asked, "Boss, you love her, don't you?"

I didn't hesitate to answer. "More than anything I've known in my life. If something were to happen to her, I wouldn't think twice about burning this city to the ground to avenge her."

Ivan added, "I'll bring the matches."

Viktor nodded in agreement, Andrei spoke up and said, "We're going to need gas as well."

Even Stephen, who was usually the quiet one, said, "I will happily light that fire."

I looked at each of them, not really surprised that they all felt the same way about Sephie, but proud that they did. Sh had brought out something new and different in each of us. We were already addicted to her. We had been living in darkness so long that we almost forgot what the light was. She came in to show us what we'd been missing this whole time and not a single one of us wanted to give that up.

After I showered and changed into a pair of slacks and a fresh shirt, I made a quick trip to the kitchen for a glass of water. I took the back stairs. As I was walking through the back room, I saw Sephie walking around the pool. Misha was behind her, but visibly dragging. His face was red, his shirt completely soaked. She looked like she had walked the entire time. Her cheeks were just the slightest bit pink, but she wasn't even breathing hard.

Gazelle.

I opened the door for her, waiting for Misha to catch up. She stood on her toes and kissed me as she walked in the house. I held the door for Misha. "You okay, man? Need someone to carry you the rest of the way?"

Still trying to catch his breath, he said, "Dude. How. She just kept going. And going. And going."

I laughed. "Did you make the mistake of racing her?"

"Noooooo. I'm not that stupid. I thought this was going to be an easy morning." He stood next to me. Misha was taller than I was, by a couple of inches. He looked down at me. "Why, Boss. Why do you hate me?"

I chuckled at him. "You're the only one that had a chance. Can you imagine Viktor or Ivan trying to keep up with her? She's like a fucking gazelle, man." I said, shaking my head. My loss yesterday still fresh in my head.

"I can hear you, you know!" Sephie yelled from the kitchen.

We both laughed. "Go shower. You smell like you've been chasing my girlfriend for the last hour," I said patting him on the shoulder.

When I got to the kitchen, she was leaning against the counter. Her arms folded under her breasts, pushing them a little higher than normal, making them look fuller than they already were. Her eyebrow raised, she looked at me, "girlfriend?"

I stammered. I hadn't even realized I had said it, but now that I thought about it, it felt completely right. I was just hoping she felt the same. I had never considered that she might not want that title, though. Now, my heart was racing thinking about the possibility of rejection. I walked to her, taking her glass of water from her hand. I finished the last half of it, then went to refill it for her. "Yes," I stated firmly. I then added, "if you're okay with that, of course." I was unsure of her reaction as I turned back to her to hand her the glass of water.

She didn't speak right away, making me even more nervous. I never got nervous.

"I could get used to the title," she said, smirking at me.

I let go of the breath I had been holding. I ran my hand through my hair, relief flooding my body.

She chuckled and walked to me. "Were you nervous just now?"

"Maybe just a little. I mean, I should have discussed it with you first," I said, staring at the counter instead of at her. I felt her hand on my cheek. She turned my head so I was looking at her. She stood on her toes and kissed my lips gently.

"You're my boyfriend. I trust your decisions."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Adrik

I went to my office to make arrangements for Sephie's neighbors to move to my building downtown while she showered and changed after her torture session with Misha. Poor guy was going to have a rough day because of her.

Ivan's plan was a solid one. I was hopeful that Ms. Jackson and Mr. Turner would agree to it. It would make things much easier as well. I could be near her during the day. I hoped it would make her as happy as it would make me.

Calling her my girlfriend in front of Misha and then the sudden panic that she might reject me made it all seem more real, somehow. With women in the past, I never had any fear that they would reject me. They all threw themselves at me, so desperate for my attention. Sephie wasn't like that at all. I could see there was an attraction there when she first looked at me, but she ran away just as much as she ran to me. She was always cognizant of what I needed. Women in my past were only concerned about what they needed. Sephie even considers my men before herself many times. She seems to intuitively know what they need, even before they do.

I had two apartments prepared for her neighbors. I would stop by later today to speak with them both in person. Unusual offers were always best delivered in person. I texted the addition to my schedule to Viktor.

Picking up the file on top of my desk, I read through the contents one more time. I'd been looking for information on Anthony's uncle in Sicily. I didn't have much, but what I did have didn't make me any happier about this deal that I made with Salvadori. His brother, Lorenzo, was no better than Anthony. It apparently ran in that family.

I knew something wasn't sitting right when Salvadori mentioned his brother, but I couldn't remember what about that man felt wrong. Finally, I found the evidence that I needed. The reason Lorenzo was in Sicily was because of my father. My father had banished him, just like I banished Anthony. Lorenzo had been stealing from my father. My father caught him and in a moment of restraint, he banished him to Sicily instead of having him killed. I always thought he did it as a favor to Salvadori, who had been a loyal boss to my father for years.

Now I was sending Anthony, a man who had a grudge against me, to a man who had a grudge against my father. Lorenzo had made a few attempts to overtake my father after he was banished, but he could never get enough support. The other bosses were too scared of my father to side with Lorenzo. The question now was how loyal the bosses were to me. They weren't scared of me, I knew that. But were they loyal?

My anger started to rise over this whole r*diculous situation. I cursed and slammed my fist on my desk. I put my head in my hands, thinking about how much I wanted to watch the life drain from Anthony's eyes.

I felt Sephie's soft hands on my shoulders. I hadn't even heard her come into my office. She didn't say a word, she just massaged my shoulders until the tension eased slightly. She leaned down and kissed my cheek, the floral scent of her shampoo filling my nostrils. I inhaled deeply. I reached up, pulling her arms around me.

"You look frustrated," she said quietly.

"I'm better now. I don't know how you do it, but I hope you never stop."

She looked at me, puzzled. "Do what?"

"You always know what I need. Sometimes before I do. You do it with the guys too. You know what they need before they do."

She just shrugged her shoulders. "It seems obvious to me, most times."

I leaned my head back and closed my eyes. "Most people are oblivious to those around them. Your observation skills are next level. I should give you a job just telling me things about people I miss. You were right about Salvadori, too."

"Don't be s*lly. Your observation skills are superb."

I pulled her around to sit in my lap. "I think we should ask Ivan whether you or I am the better emotional support sloth."

She started giggling. She covered her face with her hands. "Sometimes I don't know what comes over me. I can't believe he didn't kill me for that. I know he wanted to."

"You still don't see it. Killing you is the last thing Ivan would ever want to do," I said. My hands running lightly over her back.

She leaned against me, lost in thought. My phone started buzzing on my desk. She reached for it, handing it to me. She looked at me with a devilish spark in her eye, "you should let me answer it. I'll be your secretary."

Iglanced at the caller ID. It was Viktor. I handed the phone to her. Her eyes lit up, as she suddenly tried to be very serious. She cleared her throat and answered the call, "Hello, you've reached the phone of the man who shall remain nameless. He's currently unavailable, but I will be happy to give him a message for you. May I ask who is calling?"

I heard Viktor's deep laugh on the other end of the phone. She recognized his laugh too and started giggling.

"Sestrichka, can you please tell the man who shall remain nameless that the helicopter will be here at 12:30 and that, uh, the other matter has been added to his schedule. We will make an additional first stop and last stop."

"Of course, I will give him the message right away and you have a wonderful afternoon, you giant Russian bear of a man you. Thank you for calling."

We could hear his laughter before the call ended. She set the phone down on the desk and looked at me. "Sir, your helicopter will be here at 12:30 and your additional stops have been added to your itinerary."

I ran my hand up her back to the back of her neck. Grabbing a fistful of her still damp hair, I pulled her close and kissed her deeply. She was so full of life. "I could get used to having a sexy secretary," I said, trying to catch my breath.

She pressed her forehead to mine, her breath erratic as well.

"Wait, you have a helicopter?"

Chapter Forty

Adrik

I had told the guys to meet me in the kitchen at noon. We still hadn't decided who was going to stay with Sephie. She was still under the false impression that it was more like punishment to have to stay with her, rather than go with me and wanted to let them decide amongst themselves. She wasn't expecting them to argue over who got to stay with her, but I was. I was expecting to have to break up a fight, honestly.

They all looked at me expectantly when I walked in the kitchen with Sephie. I looked at them as seriously as I could. "One of you must stay behind with Sephie. She won't make a decision on who she wants to stay with her. She wants you to decide amongst yourselves who will stay." I barely finished the sentence, and they were already arguing over who it should be.

Andrei was quickly eliminated, as he had stayed with her the day before. That left the other four. Misha made a solid argument that she had tried to kill him that morning, so he had earned being able to stay with her. Ivan argued that he was the most skilled in hand-to-hand combat and could therefore offer the best protection to her. Viktor used the fact that he was her favorite, so he should clearly get to stay. Stephen made the case that he was the most accurate shot out of all of them, so he should stay with her, as he could easily drop a threat from 40+ yards.

I looked at her as they argued, smirking. "I told you."

"This did not go how I thought it would go," she said, staring at grown men arguing over who got to babysit her. I kissed her temple and listened to the arguing for a few more minutes. When they still couldn't come to a decision, I finally stepped in.

"Okay, enough! Misha will stay with her. My little gazelle did try to kill him this morning. He definitely earned it."

Misha threw his hands up in victory while the other three looked quite disappointed at my decision. I wasn't sure whether I should be proud they all wanted to protect her or offended they would rather stay with her than me. "Don't worry, you'll all get a chance eventually. We'll have to set up a schedule or something so nobody gets their feelings hurt," I said, overemphasizing "feelings" so they would know how silly it all looked. Although, I couldn't blame them. I desperately wanted to stay with her as well. Just a few more days and I wouldn't have to be so far apart from her during the day…

Our first stop was to the hotel where Mr. Turner worked the door. I knew Mr. Turner, as he had been working the door to this hotel for at least 20 years, maybe longer. He had seen me as a child, with my father. He knew just about every important person in this city, as they all frequented this hotel for various reasons.

We caught him as he was returning from his lunch break, on his way back to the front of the hotel.

"Mr. Turner, if I may have a few moments?"

"Of course, sir. What can I do for you? How is Miss Sephie? Is she keeping you on your toes?" he asked, with the warm smile of a grandfather inquiring about his favorite granddaughter.

I gave him a half-smile. "Yes, sir. That's actually what I wanted to speak with you about. Of sorts. She misses you and Ms. Jackson, but I don't like the thought of her going back to that apartment."

Mr. Turner nodded in agreement. "You know there were men that kicked her door in the day you left. Ms. Jackson told me about the whole fiasco."

"I know this, which is why she's still with me," I glanced around us and nodded for him to move with me to a quiet nook in the lobby where our conversation couldn't be overheard. "I would like to offer you an apartment in my building, just a few blocks from here. I have the penthouse, which would mean she would be somewhat of a neighbor to you again. I will take care of moving everything for you. In fact, everything will be taken care of. As a token of gratitude for being so good to her."

He stared at me, completely stunned. "Sir, I can't possibly. This is way too much."

I waved my hand dismissively. "Please, Mr. Turner. She misses you and I would like to see her happy. I also don't like that they know where her old apartment is. You could still be in danger there and I would never forgive myself if something happened to you and Ms. Jackson. You're very important people to her and that's all I need to know. Please tell me you'll accept."

He stammered for a moment, running his hand through his hair. "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

"And could we keep this between us for now? I would like to surprise her with it once everything is settled."

His warm grandfatherly smile came back. "Of course, sir. Mum's the word."

I extended my hand to him. "Thank you," I said as he shook my hand. "She's going to be very happy, which makes me very happy."

"She deserves it. That girl is one of a kind," he said.

I gave him a knowing look and took my leave. One down, one to go.

The afternoon was full of meetings and various matters to take care of. Before I knew it, it was time for the last stop. We pulled up to the small parking lot and parked next to Sephie's car. As I stepped out of the vehicle, the curtains parted slightly in Ms. Jackson's front window. I knew she had seen me, so I waved.

I didn't even need to knock. Her door opened as I walked up.

"To what do I owe this pleasure? How is Sephie? Is she okay?" Ms. Jackson asked as she motioned for me to come in.

"Sephie is fine." I exhaled and paused for a moment. "More than fine. She's amazing."

She nodded her head. "Does she know you're in love with her yet?"

I raised an eyebrow and looked at her.

"Oh, please. You can't fool me. It's been written all over your face from the first time I saw you step out of your vehicle and look toward her apartment that first night."

I smiled. "Guilty."

"I can't blame you. There is something about that child that draws everyone in. Her light is so strong that people just want to be near her. She's a special one. If you hurt her, I'll kill you."

I coughed, not expecting to have my life threatened. "I don't plan on it. In fact, I came to you with an offer to help make her happier, if you agree."

"I'm listening."

"I own a building downtown. Office space, apartments. I have the penthouse. I'd like to move her there soon. She misses you and Mr. Turner, so I'd like to move you both to that building so you can be near to her. Everything will be taken care of if you agree."

She thought for a minute, then looked at me squarely in the eyes. "My Lord, you love her more than I thought. I've been worried about her since you took her, but now I see there's no need to worry. You would die to protect her."

"As long as I breathe, she will be loved and protected," I said, not breaking eye contact with her.

"I'll do it," she said as she walked closer to me. She took one of my hands in both of hers. "You're a good man, Adrik. She's going to show you the best parts of yourself if you let her."

"Her wish is my command, Ms. Jackson."

She patted my hand, "good."

"Oh, can we please keep this arrangement between us for now? I'm hoping to surprise Sephie with it."

She smiled at me. "You're in deep, boy. Hope you know how to swim."

"Me too."

1

Two down.

I walked quickly back to the vehicle. Viktor was waiting outside. "Did you get everything?" I asked, as I climbed in the back seat.

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Thank you."

"Of course, sir."

We drove in relative silence back to the house. I was lost in thought, anticipating how happy she was going to be when she found out. I smiled to myself, eager to get home to her. I chuckled, remembering Ms. Jackson's frankness. I could see why she was so important to Sephie.

"You're in deep, boy. Hope you know how to swim."

I might not be the strongest swimmer, but I knew I could endure anything with her as my guide.

As we got closer to the house, Viktor asked Ivan, "do you think sestrichka has hooked Misha up with one of the maids yet?"

Ivan laughed but said nothing.

"She's going to show you the best parts of yourself if you let her."

Chapter Forty-One

Sephie

After everyone else had left for the afternoon, Misha turned to me, grinning from ear to ear. Misha was the youngest. He was the little brother of the group, but right now, he looked like he'd won the special prize and he was going to enjoy every moment of it.

I couldn't help but smile back at him. "What's on the agenda for the afternoon, boss? You're the babysitter and I can still only barely find my way around the house on my own."

He laughed. "You know it took Andrei two weeks to remember where everything was when we first came here? You're doing better than him."

"He told me! Bless him," I said, clutching my imaginary string of pearls around my neck.

He walked to the windows, looking at the storm clouds rolling in once again. "It looks like it might storm again this afternoon. What do you say we grab some lunch and spend the afternoon watching movies? I need some recovery time after you tried to kill me this morning anyway."

"That sounds perfect. Want me to make you lunch?" I asked, walking back to the kitchen.

"Net. I have surprise for you. I sent Tori to my favorite deli. She'll be back any minute now with the best sandwich you've ever eaten."

"Oh, I love surprises! Did you know you were staying with me this whole time?"

"I suspected that Boss would take it easy on me after you tried to kill me this morning, but even if I didn't get to stay. I could've had my sandwich later. It's worth the wait."

My stomach growled in anticipation.

Tori arrived soon after. Misha was right. It was the best sandwich of my life. "I'm going to have to run more if I keep eating like this," I told him as I finished the last bite of my sandwich.

He groaned, wiping his mouth. He thought for a moment and then shrugged his shoulders. "At least it will be a delicious death."

I started cleaning up our mess. "I'll clean this up. You go pick the movie. I'm successfully in a food coma and would love to do nothing more than lie around for a while."

His wide smile appeared as he got up from the counter. His boyish good looks becoming even more attractive when he smiled.

Tori reappeared in the kitchen. She went to help me clean everything up. "It's okay, Tori. I can clean this up. I feel bad for you to constantly be cleaning up after me."

She gave me a tight smile. "It's my job, Miss Sephie. Besides, I owe you for last night."

"So, it went well…?" I asked, dying to know how it ended up.

"Very well, Miss Sephie. He was so nervous to start with, but he relaxed after Boss came back. He was almost completely different when we went for a walk after dinner."

"He was so worried he was going to get in trouble. He's adorable. I'm very happy that it went well."

She grabbed my hand, looking at me seriously. "Thank you. You're going to have to give me your secret on how you've changed all of them for the better in such a short time."

I blushed. "No secret. I haven't done anything other than allow them to be who they are."

She gave me the same tight smile but said nothing further. Her reaction gave me pause, but I brushed it off as Misha yelled from the other room, asking me to choose between two movies. "My babysitter beckons!" I said dramatically as I left the kitchen.

We couldn't make the decision between two movies, so we decided to watch them both. Not like we had much else to do that afternoon…

The first movie was about a fictitious war, with all the fighting and gore you would expect. Maybe a little over the top. but a good movie. I enjoyed Misha pointing out mistakes in the fight scenes. He would point at the screen and say, "that's not even humanly possible" or "he would be dead if he tried that in real life." It made me laugh every time.

The second movie was a bit of a supernatural thriller. Ghosts, demons, and the like. The sky had gotten darker outside when we started the second movie, as the storm was now directly above us. The thunder rumbling and flashes of lightning added to the eerie feel of the movie. I didn't usually get scared at these types of movies, but this one was creeping me out. I jumped a few times at what was happening on the screen. Misha laughed at me, but he still got up and moved to the couch I was on. He picked my feet up, placing them in his lap as he sat down.

"Don't worry, gazelle, I'll protect you."

I kicked him in his ribs, gently, "I am not a gazelle!"

"You're a gazelle. Or would you prefer wildebeest? Zebra, maybe?"

I scoffed. "Fine. I'll stick with gazelle."

He laughed and patted my legs. "That's what I thought, gazelle."

I glared at him. "I hate you."

"I know," he said, his wide smile stretching across his face once more.

The movie ended, but the storm was still raging outside. Misha had fallen asleep as the movie was ending. He had stretched out beside me, his legs behind me on the couch. He still had his arm protectively around my legs as he slept. 1 smiled at how innocent he looked when he slept.

I watched the lightning show through the expansive windows. There was always something about storms that I loved. My mother told me I was born in a thunderstorm. She would say "children born in a storm can walk in the dark without fear, for they know the light is always with them."

When I was young, I never really understood what she meant. After the past few days, I was starting to understand a little more. I should be terrified of all these people. They basically kidnapped me, after one of their associates almost killed me. But I was more than fine with it. In fact, you could say I was happy about it. They weren't terrifying in the slightest. Well, maybe Ivan was a little. But even with him, all I saw was good when I looked at him. When I looked at all of them. Adrik, especially.

Life was about balance. We all had good parts and bad parts. Each day was about choosing which parts you paid the most attention to.

I heard Misha snoring softly. I slowly pulled my legs away from him and got up as quietly as I could. I stood and stretched, the soreness still present in my muscles. It felt good, though. I left Misha napping on the couch and wandered around the house. I walked into the room with the piano. No one was around, so I sat down and played a few notes. I was probably going to wake Misha up with this, but I didn't care. It felt good to have a piano to play right now.

My mother always said I had more talent for the piano than she did. She was the classically trained pianist though. I never had as much interest in it as she did. I just enjoyed playing the songs I liked and making up my own songs. I hadn't played much since she died. Every now and then I would visit the Steinway gallery and would play one of their floor models for an hour or so. The salesmen had known my mother, so they would let me play as long as I liked. It was a free demo for them, so they loved it when I would come in. They always said they sold more pianos when I was there.

I started to pick at the keys, trying to decide what to play. I played quietly at first, not really wanting to wake Misha up, but as I repeated the melody, I got lost in the music and just started playing, not at all concerned with the volume.

Music was an escape. A way for my emotions to come out. I could play angry, sad, happy, and everything in between. There was never a time that I didn't feel better after playing for a while. Before my mom died, I would play for hours, getting completely lost in the music.

I was so wrapped up in what I was playing that I hadn't noticed Misha come into the room. He didn't say a word, he just sat in one of the chairs on the other side of the room and listened intently while I stayed lost in the melody, completely lost in my own head.

Chapter Forty-Two

Adrik

We pulled up to the house, the spring storm that had rolled in late afternoon now in full swing directly above the house. We ran from the vehicles up the front steps, to avoid the rain, not bothering with umbrellas. As we got to the front door, we could hear music coming from the house. The house was always quiet. It was late enough that the house staff had already left for the day. Tori sometimes listened to music as she cooked, but never loud enough that you could hear it from outside.

As I opened the front door, we were met with a haunting melody. We all stopped in the entryway, listening. It was like we were frozen in place. It must be Sephie playing the piano. The only time it ever got touched was when one of the maids cleaned it. Otherwise, no one ever played it. It had belonged to the previous owner of the house. They didn't want to move it, so they left it. Now, I was glad they did.

The music felt like raw emotion expressed in a melody. It was haunting. It was beautiful. We walked quietly to the next room. She didn't notice us walk in, she just continued to play. The piano was positioned in such a way that she couldn't see much of the room. Misha was sitting in a chair, his gaze fixated on her playing. His expression one of complete awe as he watched her. Without a word, we all took seats and listened to her impromptu concert

I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye and saw Tori step into the doorway, equally as mesmerized as the rest of us. She glanced and saw all of us in the room, then quickly left to the kitchen. She would be starting dinner, I was sure. Andrei got up as quietly as he could and walked to the kitchen, trying not to disturb Sephie.

She continued to play for a few more minutes, but the song slowly ended. As she played the last note, she sat and stared at the keys for a moment, sighing. I heard applause and smiled as I looked to see the guys all giving her a standing ovation. I stood and clapped with them. It startled her. She looked up, completely surprised that we were all there.

"Holy s hit! When did you guys get here?" she jumped up from the bench, walking to us quickly, looking like she was slightly embarrassed. Her cheeks were flushed. She chewed on her bottom lip.

She walked to me, tucking herself into my arms where she fit so perfectly. I kissed the top of her head. "That was beautiful, solnishko. You must play for us more often," I whispered to her.

She hid her face in my shoulder. "I haven't played in a while," she said shyly.

Viktor answered her, "no one would've ever known. You have a gift, Sephie."

She didn't answer, she just hid her face from everyone in my shoulder. This was a new side of her that we hadn't seen. yet. She was normally so open and confident; it was adorable to see her be shy about something she was so clearly good at.

I wrapped my arms around her, holding her closer. I felt my heart swell. The guys all walked away quietly, leaving the two of us alone. I kissed the top of her head again. "I missed you, solnishko."

She looked up at me, smiling. My heart skipped a beat as I looked into her beautiful eyes. "I missed you too. How was your day?"

I smiled back at her, "good. I have a surprise for you. You're going to love it."

"I love surprises! What is it?" she exclaimed, as she wrapped her arms around my waist.

I clicked my tongue. "Not yet. In a few days. It's still in the works."

She pouted her lips, feigning disappointment. I kissed her lips, realizing that I'd been longing for them all afternoon. Her hands moved to behind my neck as she stood on her toes and deepened the kiss. God, I could get used to coming home to this every day.

From the doorway, Andrei cleared his throat. "Boss, dinner will be ready in about 10 minutes."

She turned her head and glared at Andrei. "Rude, Bubba. Rude."

His face dropped as he thought she was serious. She giggled and he immediately look relieved.

"Thank you, Andrei," I said. With my arms still tight around her, I walked us back toward the stairs. I wanted to change before dinner, and she was coming with me whether she wanted to or not. When we got to the bottom of the stairs, I stopped. I bent down and threw her over my shoulder, walking up the stairs as she laughed at me.

We got to my bedroom, and I threw her down on the bed. She was still laughing at me. I walked to the closet, asking what did you and Misha get into today? Were you nice to him, I hope?"

"Mmm hmm. I had to be since he gave me the world's best sandwich for lunch."

I looked back at the bed from the closet. "From Vinny's?"

She nodded her head. Vinny's was a great little hole in the wall restaurant that we discovered somewhat by accident. Vinny's father, who started the restaurant was having health problems. The family was trying to work as much as possible to come up with the money to pay for his treatments, but they fell short. Vinny came to me, explained the situation, and asked me for a loan. He had set out generous terms for paying me back. He had even brought lunch for everyone when he met with me. After one of his sandwiches, I covered all the medical bills for his father. I just asked that he pay me back in sandwiches, to which he readily agreed.

"Then we watched movies and Misha fell asleep on the couch. I watched the storm for a while, then got up and started playing. You know the rest," she said, still sounding shy about her playing.

I walked out from the closet, my shirt in my hand. She was sitting on the bed, knees pulled up to her chest, her chin resting on her knee. Every time I saw her, I felt this invisible pull toward her. Like I had to be near her. Like I had to touch her. I pulled my shirt over my head as I walked to the bed.

She looked at me, matter-of-factly, and said, "I need to go back to my apartment. I need more clothes."

"I can buy you whatever you like," I said, sitting beside her.

"I have clothes. They're just not here. There's no need to buy me new clothes," she said, rather short.

I smiled, loving this side of her. "I know, Sephie. Anthony is leaving tomorrow. I promise you will have all your stuff by the end of the week. If you need anything before then, I can send someone to buy it for you."

2/3

She hugged her knees tighter to her chest. She nodded slightly, not saying anything. I knew she wasn't happy with my answer, but I couldn't let her go back to her apartment. She also didn't know that we had already gotten all her things out of her apartment earlier this evening. If she went back to her apartment now, it would ruin the surprise.

I kissed her forehead. "Come, this talk of Vinny's has me hungry."

She silently got up and followed me out of the bedroom. Before we walked down the stairs, I stopped and turned toward her. I took both of her hands in mine, kissing each of them, "I won't keep you here forever. Just until Anthony is gone, and the threat has passed." I raised my pinky between us, "pinky swear."

She smiled and wrapped her pinky around mine.

Chapter Forty-Three

Adrik

After dinner, she had asked if we could take a walk as the sun hadn’t set completely yet. We walked around the property in relative silence, followed by a guard at a distance. She seemed lost in her thoughts. I was honestly impressed that she was comfortable with so much silence. I would steal glances at her regularly, watching her as she took in everything around her. The way the fading light of the day made her hair look like actual fire, with its varying shades of red and orange. The evening sun also made the brown in her eyes more prominent, making her eyes almost match her hair at the right angle.

She caught me staring at her and walked closer to me, silently grabbing my hand. We walked the rest of the way to the house in silence, hand-in-hand.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I asked once we got to the bedroom. She stopped, like she was thinking about it, but shook her head no. “You know you can say anything to me, anytime. I want to help.” She gave me a small smile. She walked toward me and gave me a quick kiss.

“I just want to go to bed right now. It’ll be better in the morning.”

I woke up sometime later to an empty bed. I had fallen asleep with Sephie in my arms, but now she was gone. I sat up to see if the bathroom light was on, but the room was dark. The bedroom door was slightly ajar. I got out of bed to see if she had ventured downstairs. The bedroom that she had stayed in the first night was open and I could feel the cool breeze from the balcony coming into the hallway. I quietly walked to the balcony, finding her sitting on one of the chairs. She was hugging her knees to her chest, with her head buried in her arms. I could hear her softly sobbing. My heart felt like it had just been punched at the sight of seeing her cry. I wanted to make it stop.

I said her name quietly, so I wouldn’t scare her. Kneeling in front of her, I rubbed her leg lightly. “What’s wrong. solnishko?”

She sucked in a breath but didn’t raise her head to look at me. She stayed silent.

“Sephie. Talk to me. Please.”

She raised her head enough that I could see her teary eyes. I wiped the tears from her eyes with my thumb. I looked at her, full of concern. She looked at me for so long that I thought she wasn’t going to say anything.

“Everything. Everything caught up to me at once. I miss my mom. I’ve had to relive living with my uncle. The fucked- up events with Anthony. Being here and not being able to leave. All of it.”

I found myself flinching at the last part. Did she want to leave me? Was she tired of me already? My mind was racing. How would I live without her now? It’s only been a few days, but I knew for sure that I never wanted to be without her for the rest of my life.

I heard a small laugh. She reached down and touched my face. “I don’t want to leave you, Adrik.”

I exhaled, clearly relieved. She stretched her legs down and pulled me to her. She was upset and yet, she was once again consoling me instead. I sat up again, asking, “what can I do? I promise you’ll be able to leave here after tomorrow. Anthony is supposed to be gone today, but I want to give it one more day to be safe. And then there’s the matter of your surprise at the end of the week. What about your uncle? Do you want me to have him killed? Say the word and he’s a dead man.”

She laughed, but I could tell she was seriously considering it. “He’s probably fried so many brain cells that he doesn’t even remember who I am. I don’t think he’s anything to worry about. I just don’t like having to relive it when someone new finds out.” She leaned her head back against the chair and closed her eyes.

“Sephie, I don’t know why you had to go through all of that. But it made you into the woman that I’m falling in love with today, so as weird as it sounds to say, I’m glad for it all. You’ve come into my life and made everything brighter. You light up the room when you walk in. You have five trained killers downstairs fighting over who gets to stay with you. You notice the slightest things about people. What they need, what they like, what they need to hear. You share your light with everyone and never ask for anything in return. You have my heart, Persephone. So as insane as I sound saying it, the road you’ve been forced to travel has led you here and I will spend every day of my life from this point on trying to show you how grateful I am that that road brought you to me.”

She had lifted her head when I started talking and was looking at me. A few stray tears fell from her eyes. I wiped them as she wrapped her arms around my shoulders. “I don’t know how I got so lucky,” she whispered.

“It’s me who is the lucky one here, solnishko.”

Chapter Forty-Four

Adrik

When I woke up this time, Sephie was still sleeping soundly in my arms. She would usually wake up once she felt me start to stir, but I was able to get out of bed without her waking up. She must be exhausted after last night and everything coming at her at once. I felt guilty for not being able to take care of her better. She'd been through h ell and hadn't taken the time to process it all.

I changed as quietly as I could and went downstairs to breakfast. Everyone was very concerned that Sephie wasn't with me. I told them that she had slept poorly and was still asleep.

"Is she having nightmares again?" Misha asked. "I shouldn't have watched a scary movie with her yesterday. This is all my fault."

"Net. No nightmares, at least not that I know of last night. She's been through quite a lot in the last few days. It caught up to her," I said, taking a sip of coffee.

"What can we do?" Viktor asked.

Ivan added, "does she want to leave? Is that it? She's tired of all of us now."

"She does want to leave, but not because she's tired of all of us," I said. Ivan visibly relaxed when I said she wasn't tired of us.

"Ivan and Viktor, I want you two to oversee her surprise. I want to have it done by Thursday morning, if possible. I've asked her to give me through tomorrow. I want to make sure that little piece of sh it gets on the airplane today and leaves this city. Then maybe I can relax."

Viktor and Ivan nodded as they finished breakfast. My phone buzzed in my pocket. I looked at the number, but it was not a number I knew. I looked at the text:

Bracelet is compromised. Do not give to her. We need to meet. Regular spot, 10 pm? -A

Salvadori's guard. I knew there was something off about that gift. I felt my anger rise as I cursed loudly. I had forgotten about the bracelet, to be honest. Before leaving my office, I threw it in the safe, not giving it another thought.

"Boss? Everything okay?" Misha asked.

"Andy, Salvadori's guard," I said, holding up my phone. "He said the bracelet Salvadori gave me for Sephie is compromised. I haven't given it to her. It's too ostentatious for her anyway. But the fact that he would try to get to me through her means his time is growing short."

I heard a couple of them curse. Ivan smacked the counter. "He's working with Anthony. I would bet he knows everything Anthony has been doing. He's probably been benefitting from it, too. They're both cut from the same cloth."

"Agreed. However, we can use this to our advantage. We'll check the bracelet later. We can use it to feed them false info, if nothing else," I said. "It's been in the safe since Sunday night, so he hasn't gotten anything from it. We can change that. Andy also wants to meet tonight. He must have more info."

"Regular spot?" Viktor asked.

I nodded my head. I confirmed the meeting with Andy that night. I also sent a text to my spy at the airport, asking for confirmation that he was able to get a camera inside Anthony's plane. I wanted to make sure it was him on that plane. I also had them put a tracker on the plane, so we could make sure it made it to Sicily.

Tracker and camera both in place. Plane is scheduled to leave at noon. Will notify when it's in the air.

At least that detail was going to plan. Now I had to plan what to do about Salvadori, but I would wait to hear what else Andy had for me tonight before making any definite plans.

When I was done with my workout, I walked quietly back in my bedroom. Sephie was still sound asleep on the bed. I grabbed clothes and went across the hall to shower so I wouldn't wake her up. When I was ready to leave, I left her a note on the bedside table and kissed her forehead gently. I was secretly hoping she would wake up so I could spend a few minutes with her before I left for the day, as I wouldn't be back until late. She didn't move as I kissed her forehead.

Sleep well, my love.

I needed Viktor and Ivan, which meant neither of them could stay with Sephie. Since Misha and Andrei had both already gotten the chance to stay with her, that left Stephen as the only fair choice. Stephen had been with me the shortest amount of time of all of them. I trusted him, but I didn't trust him as much as the other four guys. I didn't feel completely comfortable leaving him with Sephie. Not yet.

I pulled him aside. "I need you at the airport. You're the best shot of everyone here. I want you on a roof. If that fu cker tries to send the plane off without him on it, sh oot him."

"Yes, sir." I can't be sure, but he looked a little relieved to not be on babysitter duty. I wasn't sure if that was because he was awkward around women or something else. He immediately left for the airport.

That left the choice between Misha and Andrei. Of course, they argued. This time, however, they decided by paper, rock, scissors. I was happy to see my men making such important decisions based on a children's game.

Andrei won, best 3 out of 5. They would've kept going, had I not pushed Misha toward the door.

I looked at Andrei. "She's a little fragile. Be gentle with her."

He nodded once. "She'll be fine, boss. I'll do my best to cheer her up. See you tonight."

The day went fast, as I had endless meetings that consumed the entire day. Viktor and Ivan were successful at getting Ms. Jackson and Mr. Turner all set up in their new apartments that day. They just had a few items at their old apartment to get the next day. This meant I would be able to bring Sephie with me on Thursday to show her the surprise. I was looking forward to seeing her reaction. I caught myself thinking about how much making her happy was making me happy. I had never really bothered to care about anyone else's happiness before. Definitely not any woman I had been in a relationship with. They were more like an afterthought. I would regularly forget their names when I was younger. That's how little they mattered to me. I wasn't sure I could breathe without Sephie in my life. I had known her for such a short time, but I couldn't imagine being without her.

I was counting the minutes until I could get home to her. It was getting late. I only had my meeting with Andy left and I could see her.

Andy always met me across town from where Salvadori lived. He didn't want to take a chance on anyone recognizing him. There was a small park in that part of town. He would take a stroll and sit on the same park bench, waiting for me to arrive.

Just as expected, he was waiting for me. I sat next to him, looking out at the river that ran next to this area of the park.

"Sir," he said as I sat down.

I nodded. "What do you have for me?"

"That bracelet, sir. It belonged to Anthony. He had it custom-made for one of his girlfriends. He thought she was cheating on him, so he gave that to her so he could track where she went and listen to what she would say. It was Anthony's idea to give it to you for Sephie. Salvadori wasn't going to do it at first. I'm not sure what changed he's been taking another guard with him when he meets with Anthony. They're planning something, sir. His brother in Sicily has been waiting for a chance to come back to the states and feels like Anthony is his chance back. They want to take over, from what I can gather. I think they have Salvadori convinced they can do it. He's become greedy in his old age."

"I see," I said. It did not surprise me that Lorenzo was trying to come back, nor that he would use Anthony and Salvadori to do it. "To your knowledge, are any of the other bosses involved?"

"No, sir. He tried to recruit Niko, but I'm not sure of Niko's reaction."

"Thank you, Andy. Anything else?"

"No, sir."

"Are you okay still at Salvadori's? He doesn't suspect?"

"He might be getting suspicious. I think this needs to be the last meeting for a while, sir. My apologies."

"No need, Andy. You know where to find me. If it goes south, we will get you out."

"Thank you, sir."

I got up and walked away. "Viktor, schedule a meeting with Niko tomorrow," I said as I climbed in the vehicle.

"Yes, sir. To the house, sir?"

"I think we should go back to the penthouse first. I want to take the helicopter instead of drive."

"I'll have the pilot waiting when we get there."

"Thank you, Viktor."

My mind replayed my conversation with Andy on the drive back to the penthouse. It angered me that Salvadori was actively trying to turn the other bosses against me. He was quickly becoming a ca ncer that needed to be cut out. But he could prove useful to me for a little while longer. This wasn't the first time I'd dealt with unruly bosses. It was more of an annoyance than anything. I'd been so much more generous than my father ever was, I had a feeling they all thought of me as soft. Good. Let them think that. I could be just as ruthless as my father in matters of business. But I now had the one thing my father never did.

Sephie. I would destroy the world to protect her

Chapter Forty-Five

Sephie

I woke up and slowly stretched, fully expecting to feel Adrik's body next to mine. Instead, I felt the cold bed. I sat up, not realizing it was as late as it was, searching for him. I reached for my phone on the bedside table and saw his note.

*Sephie,

You were sleeping so peacefully that I couldn't bring myself to wake you before leaving. Know that I'm counting the minutes until you're in my arms again.

-A*

I checked my phone. It was 12:30. They've probably been gone for a while already. I decided to get dressed to go see who the lucky guy was that got to stay with me today.

It didn't take me long to find that answer. Andrei was reading a book, sitting on the top stair when I came out of the bedroom. He closed his book and stood up. "Good morning, sestrichka. How did you sleep?"

"It's not technically morning anymore, Bubba. That's how well I slept," I said, rubbing the last bit of sleep from my eyes.

"You must be hungry, Sleeping Beauty. You slept through breakfast. It's not like you to skip a meal," he said, squatting down in front of me with his arms out to the side so I could hop on his back.

"You spoil me, Bubba. But I fucking love it and hope you never stop. Walking is highly overrated," I said as I hopped on his back.

"I'm going to have to make some kind of agreement with Tori so you can keep doing this when you two get married. Like grandfather me into your relationship."

He just shook his head as he walked downstairs, again like he wasn't carrying me. "She will be okay with this. Or she won't and I'll deal with it," he said shrugging his shoulders.

He deposited me on the counter as he opened the fridge. "How long has everyone been gone?" I asked, swinging my legs like I was a kid.

He placed a sandwich from Vinny's next to me on the counter. "Long enough that I had Tori grab us lunch."

My arms shot up above my head, "YES! It's official. You're my favorite. Misha had a good one-day run, but his reign is now over."

"He almost won and got to stay home today. We had to go best 3 out of 5 so I could beat him."

I raised my eyebrow and cut my eyes at him as I unwrapped the sandwich.

"We played paper, rock, scissor to decide who got to stay home with you," he said grinning.

"He gave you the rock thinking it was going to win every time, didn't he?"

Andrei laughed. "Almost every time. He's too predictable."

"Poor Misha. He's so young. So inexperienced," I said in between bites. "Besides, I wanna know about you and Tori. Did you get some time with her this morning while I was still asleep and everyone was gone?"

He blushed and nodded his head. "We had a little time this morning to speak in the kitchen after everyone was gone. She's the one that told me about Misha getting you Vinny's yesterday. We had lunch together, since you were still sleeping."

"I owe her a high-five later."

He smiled. "You like her?" cocking his head to the side as he waited for my assessment.

"I don't know her very well, but she seems nice, Bubba. Girls are sometimes weird with me, but she's been nice. I think it's because she works for my boyfriend."

"How are girls weird with you? Doesn't everyone love you?" he asked.

"Ha! Oh, no. No, they do not. Not everyone. I have a long list of people that would gladly clap for my demise. Most of those are girls. You can ask my friend Max. He's never had a girlfriend that liked me."

Andrei looked very serious as he threw away the wrapper from my sandwich. "I don't understand. You're so…you. How could anyone hate you?"

His innocence made me smile. I shrugged my shoulders. "I don't know, Bubba. It's a mystery because we both know I'm perfect in every way." I grinned at him.

He was still looking at me seriously. "Da. You are. I read that on the internet so it must be true."

I laughed. He couldn't hold a straight face any longer and started laughing as well. He leaned closer to me so he could whisper, "she's not as funny as you. She doesn't think my jokes are funny."

I covered my mouth and faked being shocked. "Your jokes are supposed to be funny?"

He clutched his heart. "It hurts. It hurts right here." He bent over and clutched the counter just as Tori walked into the kitchen. She saw him bent over the counter looking like he was maybe having a heart attack, possibly dying, all while I sat on the counter and laughed at him.

Going out on a limb here and marking this one down as one of the reasons girls didn't like me.

Tori rushed to him. "Andrei!" she said as she grabbed him. It only made him laugh, which embarrassed Tori. Her face turned red as she looked at both of us.

"We were joking. He faked being hurt by my sarcasm. No harm done," I said.

She looked to Andrei, who was still laughing, and walked off in a huff. His face got serious. He looked to me, but I just shrugged my shoulders. "Don't look at me, Bubba. I would've thought that was funny. I'm offended she didn't laugh, if we're being honest, but you should still go talk to her. I'll stay right here until you get back."

"You promise you'll stay? I'll be right back. Like two minutes, tops."

"Go," I said, shooing him toward the direction Tori had left.

It was more like ten minutes before Andrei came back. He had his head down, looking slightly defeated.

"That bad, huh?" I asked, still sitting in the same spot he had left me in.

He just exhaled loudly, running his hand through his hair.

"Come on, let's go for a walk. You can tell me about it," I said hopping off the counter.

"You want to walk? You don't want a ride?"

"Bubba. You're already in trouble. I don't think we should add to it. Come on, let's go," I said, hooking my arm through his and pulling him toward the back door.

Once we were outside and a safe enough distance away that she wouldn't be able to overhear our conversation, I asked, "so she's mad because you were having fun with me?"

He just looked at me, somewhat surprised. "Da. She said we're all acting so different now that you're here He paused and then added, "she's right about that. We are acting different, but I thought she liked the change? I'm so confused. Now it seems like she doesn't."

I thought as we walked slowly past the gardens. The sweet floral aroma was heavy in the air as it was warm today, with very little breeze. I replayed the conversation Tori and I had in the kitchen the day before, when she asked me what my secret was for getting them to all come out of their shells.

I sighed. "I don't know, Andrei. Maybe she's jealous? Maybe she wanted you all to act differently for her? Maybe she thought we were laughing at her? Maybe it doesn't have anything to do with us and she's just having a bad day? Women are complicated."

He rolled his eyes. "You are so right. She has nothing to be jealous of and I told her that we weren't laughing at her. Maybe she's just having a bad day. It has nothing to do with us because we're perfect in every way." He nodded his head like he was confirming his last statement.

I grinned at him. "I mean, that explanation is good for me. Will it be good for her, though?"

"Ugh. This is why I don't want a woman sometimes. They're too stressful."

"You'll hear no arguments from me on that one. This is why the only female friend I have is 50 years older than I am. Ohhh, you can have Ms. Jackson. She's got a good sense of humor!"

He had to stop walking because he was laughing so hard. "Can you…imagine…. I would break her. This is a bad plan."

I thought for a moment. "That is not the visual I was planning to have in my head this afternoon, but you make a solid argument. I'll concede. It was a bad plan. Looks like you're stuck trying to make up for whatever it was that we did wrong."

He hooked his arm through mine this time. "Let's keep walking for a little longer first."

"Procrastination for the win!" I said, happily walking farther away from the house with him.

Chapter Forty-Six

Sephie

We stayed gone for close to two hours. We walked to the lake where we sat and talked for a while, then decided we should probably return to the house. When we got closer to the house, he turned to ask me, “you miss your friend, Max?”

I nodded. Max and I had been friends for a few years. We both started at the restaurant around the same time and quickly discovered that we could make the time pass faster by clowning around with each other. The regular bartender had quit, so we covered the bar until they found a replacement. We ended up making the restaurant more money than the other bartender ever did in one weekend. Women were flocking to watch Max pour their drinks and give them his best million-dollar smile. I always thought he was handsome, but I didn’t quite understand the obsession with him. Maybe that’s why we were always friends. I was immune to his charms.

“I do miss him. I miss my life. It seems crazy to complain about being here and I’m not complaining. I’m really grateful to all of you for keeping me safe. But I miss being able to do what I want when I want. With no babysitter. Not that I don’t love you guys, I mean.”

He walked a few steps in silence. He just stopped in front of me and got in his usual stance for me to jump on his back. “Come, we must make the best of it while you’re here then.”

“You’re going to get in so much more trouble with Tori if I do that,” I said trying to walk past him.

He grabbed my arm and pulled me back toward him. “I don’t want to date a woman that has a problem with my friends. She will have to get used to it. Or she can date someone else.”

I looked at him, somewhat wide-eyed. This was a change. Max usually put distance between us when he would date a girl that didn’t like me. It only ever lasted a few weeks and then he’d be back to wanting to hang out with me. “You’re sure, Bubba?”

He smiled at me, “sure, spider monkey. Now get on.”

“You ain’t gotta ask me twice,” I said in my best redneck voice as I jumped on his back. He walked us toward the house. I thought about everything as we got closer and hugged his neck a little tighter. “I hope she deserves you, Andrei.”

We couldn’t find anyone when we got back inside. I told Andrei to drop me at the piano and he could go find Tori. He’d be able to hear me that way and know I was fine. He reluctantly dropped me off and rushed to find her. I sat looking at the keys for a few minutes, but eventually started to play one of my mom’s favorite songs. I had made up most of the song one night, just goofing around. She said she loved it so much she made me write it down and finish it. She would ask me to play it often. It reminded her of my father and a song he would hum to her when they were around the house. She was convinced I had remembered the song from when I was a baby. She said he used to hum it to me to get me to go to sleep.

I barely had any memories of my father, as he died when I was still so young. I had a few pictures of him, but it was almost like looking at a stranger. My mom told me I had his eyes, but my eye color was different than his. It was different from hers, too. And neither of my parents had red hair, so I was somewhat of a mystery to them both. My mom used to laugh, especially when I was mad about something as a child and tell me that I had come out right as the biggest streak of lightning lit up the sky and it burned my hair and gave me a temper.

I smiled as I played her song, remembering the good times with her. A single tear fell as I looked down at my hands, remembering what her hands looked like when she would play. When I was small, I used to sit beside her and watch her as she played. I was completely mesmerized by the piano from a young age. She was so hopeful that I would be a concert pianist one day. That didn’t exactly happen. More tears threatened to fall as I contemplated whether I was a disappointment to my mom. I was definitely not a concert pianist. I was a waitress that wasn’t even allowed to work at the moment because some insane man wanted to have me killed to get to my boyfriend. Yeah, seems like the fairy tale she always wanted for me.

The song ended and I rested my head on the music rack, fighting back tears. I chewed on my bottom lip to calm myself. Just one more day and I can leave. Maybe I can go see Max. I exhaled, trying to keep the tears from falling freely. I wiped my eyes just as a giant Russian sat down beside me on the piano bench. Andrei didn’t say anything, he just pulled me into his side, hugging my shoulders. The tears started to fall, and he hugged me tighter.

I finally got control and looked at him. “How did it go with Tori? Did you blame everything on me like you should have?”

“Everything will be fine, Sephie. None of this is your fault and we will make it better very soon. I promise.”

I rested my head on his shoulder. We sat like that for a few minutes. He reached out and started tapping at random keys. He would test the sound of each one, then would play the keys that sounded best together. As he was pecking out a small melody, I played a more intricate improvisation on top. He grinned as he kept trying to play the right notes that he’d chosen.

“You’re a natural, Bubba,” I grinned at him.

The sun set and Adrik still wasn’t home. Andrei had said that he had a late meeting, so I was trying to not worry about him. The house staff and Tori had all left for the evening, so it was just me and Andrei. He was still partially in the doghouse, so he thought it best to give Tori some space. He said their talk that afternoon went better, but she was still mad at him for laughing at her in front of me.

Delicate ego. Check.

Around 10:30, Andrei got a message that they were coming home. “They’re flying in, so they’ll be here soon.”

I tried to contain my excitement. I felt silly missing Adrik this much, but I had missed spending any time with him this morning after we went back to bed. I thought back to our conversation on the balcony that morning. “…it made you into the woman I’m falling in love with today.” He had said that so easily, like it was fact. I smiled to myself, thinking about his nervousness when I said I wanted to leave the house. Was this powerful man really worried that I would want to leave him?

Andrei pulled me out of my thoughts. “Come, I’ll take you to the landing pad. You can meet him there. It will make him happy.”

I jumped up. “Really? It would make me happy too.” He bent down and I jumped on his back eagerly, slapping his shoulder. “Get the lead out boy! We don’t want to be late!”

He laughed and took off toward the front door. He walked us some distance to the side of the house, where there was a large clearing with a concrete pad in the middle. I hadn’t been to this side of the property yet. We were just approaching the pad when he heard the helicopter. “See? There they are,” he said pointing to the lights in the sky in the distance.

It didn’t take them long to land and Adrik stepped out of the helicopter. He was a sight for sore eyes in all black. Damn, he looked extra sexy. Was it because I missed him? Andrei was still holding me on his back. I jumped down, as Adrik saw us and started to close the distance between us quickly. I ran to his arms, my lips crashing into his. I felt like I was almost desperate for him right then and I wanted him to know, without a doubt, that I had missed him. We heard a couple of whistles from the guys, but I didn’t care at that moment. He groaned as he broke this kiss to breathe. “Somebody missed me,” he said, that sexy smirk on his face.

1 grinned at him. “Maybe a little,” I said as I reached up and kissed him again.

I felt him smile against my kiss. “I missed you more,” he said, picking me up to carry me to the house. I smiled and rested my head against his shoulder, wrapping my arms around his neck and shoulders. “How was your day, solnishko?”

“Um…good.” I said, not sure if I should bother him with the drama between Andrei and Tori.

He stopped walking and looked at me seriously. “Who do I need to have killed?” he asked.

I giggled. “Well, technically me, so I feel like that’s a bad life choice all around.”

He looked at me sternly, one eyebrow raised. “Persephone, what have you done?”

*I made Tori put Andrei in the doghouse already. I didn’t mean to! We were just joking in the kitchen, and she walked in, thinking Andrei was hurt and we started laughing more and she thought we were laughing at her.”

He scoffed. “Women are complicated.” He continued up to the house.

“You’re telling me,” I said, rolling my eyes as he laughed. When we got inside, I asked “did you eat? Do you want me to make you something?”

“No need, love. We ate already. I am, however, still hungry,” he said as he set me down. He leaned in to kiss me and added, “just not for food.”

I couldn’t help myself. I kissed him deeply, my entire body craving his. I pressed my body to his, not wanting any space between us. I wasn’t sure what had come over me, but I simply couldn’t get enough of him. He responded in kind, his strong arms pulling me against him firmly. His lips devouring mine as his tongue explored every inch of my mouth. A soft moan escaped my lips as I tried to press my knees together, feeling the incredible need for him growing.

“We should go upstairs before I lose complete control, solnishko,” he said as he grabbed my hand pulling me quickly to the stairs.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Adrik

I was anxious to get home to Sephie. Missing talking to her before I left for the day was harder than I thought. I had already grown accustomed to our morning routine in just a few short days. Not being able to kiss her, to talk to her this morning made me miss her more than usual. I found myself hoping that she was in better spirits tonight than last night, but I vowed to do everything in my power to make it better if she wasn't.

"We're 10 minutes out, boss. I also sent word to Andrei that we were on our way home. He said Princess was starting to get impatient and worried," Ivan said. The corners of his mouth were curled up in a half smile.

"Thank you, Ivan. Did he say anything else?"

"Net. Just that she was starting to worry because it was so late, and we weren't back yet. He told her you had a late meeting."

I found myself getting more anxious to see her. I never wanted to cause her worry. I should've told her I had a late meeting, but it slipped my mind. I was too focused on how beautiful she looked while peacefully sleeping this morning to consider small details.

We approached the landing pad on the side of the house. It was dark, but the lights from the helicopter were bright enough that I could just make out Andrei's sizeable frame walking toward the landing pad. I could see Sephie's red hair just to the side of his head. She must be hitching a ride. It was one of the small things that made me adore her. She had a childlike innocence about her in so many ways, but I was impressed that she could keep that innocence knowing what she'd been through. I smiled at the thought of her laughing with Andrei while they waited for us to land.

As soon as we touched down, I opened the door and stepped out. Andrei kept Sephie a safe distance away, but I could already see her gorgeous smile as she waited for me. Ducking to avoid the blades, I walked quickly toward her. Once I was clear, I stood up completely and saw her running to me. I was met by her lips crashing into mine as she wrapped herself around me.

I should let her sleep in the mornings more often if this is how she greets me when I get back…

I pressed her even closer to me and returned the kiss, barely able to breathe from her passion. As the guys walked by us, they whistled. Somebody clapped, even. She had been shy before about showing too much affection in front of them, but that was clearly not an issue tonight.

I groaned and broke the kiss, needing to breathe. "Somebody missed me."

She grinned up at me. "Maybe a little." She stood on her toes and kissed me once more.

I smiled against her lips. "I missed you more," I said as I reached down and picked her up in my arms. She wrapped her arms around my neck, resting her head on my shoulder. "How was your day, solnishko?"

I felt her tense slightly. "Um…good."

I stopped immediately. "Who do I need to have killed?"

She giggled, that sweet precious laugh that meant she was truly happy. I felt my heart swell in my chest just looking at her, happy in my arms. "Well, technically me, so I feel like that's a bad life choice all around."

She was so adorable; it was hard not to smile at her. I looked at her sternly, with one eyebrow raised. "Persephone, what have you done?"

"I made Tori put Andrei in the doghouse already. I didn't mean to! We were just joking in the kitchen, and she walked in, thinking Andrei was hurt and we started laughing more and she thought we were laughing at her."

Delicate ego on that one. I just shook my head and continued walking. "Women are complicated."

"You're telling me," she said as she rested her head on my shoulder once again. As we walked to the house, her fingers played with my collar and ran lightly over my neck and chest where it was exposed. She was driving me crazy and didn't even know it.

We got inside the house, and I set her down. "Did you eat? Do you want me to make you something?"

Always so thoughtful toward everyone else. "No need, love. We ate already. I am, however, still hungry," I said as I kissed her lips once more, then whispered "just not for food" into her ear.

I was not expecting her reaction. She wrapped her arms around my neck, pressing her body completely to mine and kissed me just as passionately as she had on the helicopter pad. I felt my desire for her trying to take complete control.

I wanted her. All of her.

I heard her moan softly into my mouth and that was the end of my control. I grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the stairs.

"We should go upstairs before I lose complete control, solnishko,"

I walked quickly up the stairs. She was right behind me the whole time. It almost felt like she was pushing me to go faster. We got to the bedroom and as soon as the door closed, I pulled her toward me again. I turned and pushed her against the door, pushing my body against her, my lips on hers. I was now fully aroused and wanting her to know what she was doing to me. She grabbed my shirt, untucking it. Her hands quickly found their way to my bare skin, her touch was almost electric. She ran her hands up my back and I felt her dig her fingernails into my back lightly. I groaned into her mouth. I could feel her smile as she knew she was driving me crazy.

Her fingers quickly moved to my chest, unbuttoning my shirt. Once she got two buttons unbuttoned, I stepped back from her. I pulled my shirt off over my head and threw it down. My hands grabbed her hips to pull her to me once again, her lips immediately on mine once again. As slowly as I could, my hands slipped under her shirt. I didn't want her to feel uncomfortable. Not now.

She broke the kiss and looked at me like she knew what I was thinking. She smiled at me, gently pushing me back so I would give her a little room. She lifted her shirt over her head and threw it on top of mine. She then grabbed my hands and placed them around her, so I was touching her scars.

"It's okay. I want you to touch me," she said, looking me in the eyes as I ran my hands over her back. She didn't flinch, she didn't get tense, she just looked at me while my hands ran over her scars. I leaned down and kissed her neck. I could hear her breaths coming quicker as I nibbled my way down her neck. With one hand, I unbuttoned her pants, pulling at the zipper to give me more access.

I grabbed her hips, picking her up. She wrapped her legs around me, her lips finding mine once again. I walked us to the bed. Laying her down, I pulled her jeans off, throwing them toward the pile of shirts somewhere by the door. She laughed. I ran my hands up her long legs, watching her reaction to my touch. I leaned down and kissed her stomach. She flinched and giggled. "That tickles." I rubbed my facial hair lightly over her stomach to make her laugh again.

She pulled me up to her lips, wrapping her legs around my waist as I laid down on top of her. I could feel the heat between her legs. I was dying to be inside her. I kissed her neck again, giving her little bites every so often as they always made her gasp slightly.

"Adrik," she said breathlessly. Her breathy voice turned me on even more. "I want you."

Chapter Forty-Eight

Adrik

I looked at her, searching her eyes for the slightest hesitation. She put her hands on the side of my face and repeated, “I want you.”

I kissed her deeply, reaching behind her to undo her bra before standing to get rid of my pants and her panties. When she saw me fully na ked, her eyes widened just slightly before she swallowed once. I smirked at her. “I’ll go slow, solnishko. I don’t want to hurt you.”

She nodded as I laid on top of her again. Her legs wrapped around my waist once again. I kissed her, my hands. roaming down her stomach and over her hips. When I felt her pus sy, it was even more wet than the last time. “F**k, Sephie. You’re so wet,” I said kissing one breast, then the other. My fingers moving back and forth across her little. button. I leaned down and kissed her, positioning myself between her legs. I rubbed my co ck in her wetness as she moaned into my mo uth. It was the sweetest sound.

I slowly started to enter her, watching to make sure I didn’t hurt her. I pushed in a little more, then waited for her to adjust before continuing. “You’re okay?”

She nodded her head eagerly and pushed her hips against me, indicating that I could slide all the way in. I still went slow, as she gasped when she felt the full size of my co ck. Once I was completely inside her, I felt her clench around me. I groaned, knowing that I wasn’t going to last long if she kept doing that. She did it once more and giggled in my ear as she kissed my neck.

I moved slowly in a steady rhythm and then slammed into her hard, just once. She moaned loudly as I whispered, “turnabout is fair play, my love.” She smiled up at me and pulled me to her so she could kiss me again. I followed her lead, as she increased the kiss, I increased the rhythm. It didn’t take long until her legs were starting to shake around me and I knew she was close. I watched as she gave into her o*gasm, losing complete control for a few moments, lost in the feeling. She was the most beautiful sight I had ever seen.

As she came down, she wrapped her legs tighter around me, clenching against my co ck inside her. She was already tight, but when she did that, I just about couldn’t take it. Her hands ran over my back, lightly grazing me with her fingernails. She ran her hands down to my a*s and grabbed it as she pushed her hips into me. I inhaled sharply. I wasn’t expecting her to be so demanding, but whatever she wanted, I would give to her. I’d never felt this way toward any woman before. I already knew I’d never be able to get enough of her.

She pushed the limits of my stamina. I wanted her to o*gasm again while she made me c um. Increasing my rhythm, I started to push into her harder. She moaned louder, meeting my thrusts with her hips. She was amazing. I could feel her getting close again and I knew I wouldn’t be able to last much longer. As I pushed her over the edge and felt her o*gasm again, I felt my own release. She wrapped her arms around me as I collapsed on top of her, still inside her.

It took a few minutes for us both to catch our breath. I propped myself up on my elbows and looked at her. She was absolutely stunning lying beneath me, her eyes dancing in the light, her cheeks slightly flushed, her hair as wild as ever. My breath caught looking at her.

“You ok?” she asked, reaching a hand up to my face.

I turned and kissed her palm. “Very. I just can’t help it. You’re so beautiful.”

She smiled sweetly at me. I went to move off her, hating the part where I would have to pull out of her. I stretched out on the bed, opening my arms for her to snuggle in next to me. She immediately moved to my side and laid her head on my chest, her arm across my stomach. I ran my hands over her body as she laid next to me, still not feeling like I had gotten enough of her.

“I’m going to let you sleep every morning if this is the result,” I said.

She rested her chin on my chest to look at me. “I mean, it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world, but I like seeing you in the morning before you leave.”

I smiled at her. “I like seeing you in the morning too. I almost woke you this morning just so I could steal a kiss.”

“You have my permission to always wake me to steal a kiss,” she said, resting her head on my chest again. She was tracing circles across my stomach as I was running my hand across her back. It seemed like only a few minutes, and her hand got quieter, her breathing slower, and I knew she had fallen asleep. I watched her slumber for a bit before losing my own battle against sleep.

When I opened my eyes the next morning, the sun was beginning to rise, and the early morning light was just starting to pour into the bedroom. I looked at Sephie, still sleeping soundly half on top of me. I managed to sit up just slightly, so I could get a better look at her. Her pale skin gave her the look of a porcelain doll. It was a stark contrast to her red hair that fell over her scarred back. I ran my fingers through her hair, causing her to snuggle into me more. She sighed. “Good morning,” she said in a half-whisper.

“Good morning, solnishko.” I ran my hands over her body as she continued to wake up.

“Mmmm. This is really what I missed when you let me sleep yesterday. I love your hands on me as I wake up.”

“You can have my hands on you whenever you like. For as long as you like.”

She rested her chin on my chest to look at me. “Promise?”

I held my pinky up to her. “Pinky swear.”

She grinned and grabbed my pinky with hers.

“Are you going to be late tonight?” she asked, a devilish grin on her face.

“I can be if you want to greet me the way you did last night. I wouldn’t be mad at that.”

“It was pretty amazing,” she said, reaching up to kiss me.

My phone buzzed on the nightstand. I groaned and checked it. It was Viktor.

Meeting with Niko at 10. Your office.

“Business?” she asked as she rolled off me and stretched, her joints popping.

“I have a meeting with Niko this morning. This Anthony situation is getting bigger.”

“Niko? He’s the older guy with black hair except at his temples where it’s shockingly wh ite?”

I nodded. She thought for a minute.

“He rubs his left eyebrow when he’s being dishonest, like he’s smoothing out the hair. Granted, he has some bushy a*s eyebrows. But that’s his tell when he’s lying.”

“How do you know all this, solnishko? You were right about Salvadori. His eye twitched like you said.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know. It seems obvious to me. I have been their chosen waitress for a couple of years, but I picked up on their quirks pretty quickly. I guess I just notice things like a weirdo.”

I chuckled. “You’re not a weirdo. You have a very valuable skill. I’m going to give you a job just observing people for me.”

She inhaled and stretched again. “Are you sure you can afford me?” she asked as she got out of bed and headed for the bathroom. She looked back at me before she closed the door, grinning over her shoulder

Chapter Forty-Nine

Adrik

I reluctantly left the house much earlier than normal because of my meeting with Niko. I was tense at the possibility that this situation with Anthony was going to get out of hand. I feared it was already to that point, given he was talking to other bosses and trying to persuade them to turn against me. I was anxious to get this matter resolved quickly.

As we flew to the penthouse, I replayed the previous night in my head. The way Sephie looked at me with so much longing, so much passion. I'd never had a woman look at me like that, especially not after such a short time. She gave herself so completely to me. I wanted to spend every night showing her just how much she meant to me. I closed my eyes, the picture of her face etched clearly into my mind's eye. I was already counting the minutes until I could hold. her in my arms once more.

Poor Misha had to stay with her, as she wanted to go for another run after we left. At least I wouldn't have to worry about him getting soft while he watched over her. She promised to go easier on him this time, but I have a distinct feeling that his idea of easy is much different from hers.

Niko was led into my office by Viktor promptly at 10:00. I motioned for him to take a seat. He looked nervous, so I repained quiet and watched him. He wiped his sweaty palms on his pants as he sat in the chair opposite mine.

"Hello, sir. It's good to see you again," he said, trying to sound friendly. His thick Italian accent prominent.

I nodded.

"If you don't mind my asking, sir, what is this meeting about?" he asked, still visibly nervous.

"It's come to my attention that you and Salvadori have been…speaking," I said.

"Salvadori and I speak often, sir. Can you tell me what we've been speaking about that gives you concern?" He rubbed. his palms on his pants once more.

"You tell me." I wanted to see if he would tell me everything or if he would try to cover for Salvadori.

"Uh, well, sir, Salvadori sometimes has grand plans that he has no intention of following through on. I believe this was one of those times. He was angry about you increasing his tax, he might've said some things that he didn't mean in the heat of the moment."

I raised my eyebrow and stared at him intently, which proved to make him even more nervous.

"Sir, if you please, I thought he was crazy for even thinking it and I told him so. I said, "Sal, you're fuc king crazy to be even thinking that' and told him to be careful."

"Tell me his plans," I raised my voice just enough that he cleared his throat, now visibly squirming in his seat.

"He wasn't happy that you banished Anthony to Sicily, even though it was his original idea. He thought he'd be able to send Tony to Sicily for a few weeks and then he'd be able to come back. You forbidding him to come back angered him. He told me that his brother has been coming up with a plan to come back to the states, but he's been ignoring him.

Now that Anthony is there with his brother, he's starting to listen to his brother. Lorenzo is an evil son of a bi tch. I'm glad he's not allowed in this city. He did tremendous damage while he was here," he said while rubbing his left eyebrow, like he was trying to smooth the hair.

"What else," I said, tapping my fingers on my desk. I could feel myself losing patience, but I was determined to remain calm. I couldn't use this situation to my advantage if I lost my temper now.

"Sal was talking about talking to the other bosses, namely Vito because he thinks Vito is weak. Sal wants power. He wants to take over other areas of the city. He's greedy in his old age. The people in his part of the city are not happy right now, as he's been withholding money from them. I've heard he's starting to force more taxes on the businesses in exchange for his protection. If they don't pay, his guys go rough the owners up.

I clenched my jaw, trying to keep my cool. Those were tactics that were prevalent when my father was in charge. The people of the city feared my organization and wanted us gone when my father was in control. I'd spent years reversing that. Why does he now wish to ruin the peace? He's making more money under me than he ever did under my father.

It didn't make sense.

"Anything else?" I asked.

"No, sir. I just want you to know I'm loyal to you, sir. It was never a question," he said, running his fingers over his left eyebrow once again.

"That'll be all then." He quickly got up to leave. Viktor opened the door to escort him out. Once he was out of sight, I stood and paced my office. Viktor would return with Ivan once Niko was out of the building. I was furious and on the verge of losing my temper. I slammed my fist on my desk just as Viktor and Ivan walked into my office.

"It went that well?" Ivan asked as he took a seat. Viktor smirked and took a seat beside Ivan.

"That son of a bi tch Salvadori is trying to take over the city. Niko supports him. I need to meet with the other bosses to find out where their loyalties lie. I want you two to send guys to Sal's part of the city. He's been strong-arming his businesses. Find out how the people feel about this change. We might be able to use the people against him. I need guys that I trust in there to find as much information as I can." I was still pacing my office. "Viktor, I need you to set up meetings with the other bosses."

"Yes, sir. Do you still want tomorrow mostly clear?" he asked. I had planned on surprising Sephie tomorrow and I wasn't going to change those plans unless absolutely necessary.

"Of course. She's the only thing keeping me from ordering their deaths right now."

Both chuckled. Ivan asked, "why does he want to take over the city? Is he not making enough money? What's the end goal? It doesn't make sense."

"I'm not sure yet. I suspect it has to do with his brother Lorenzo and my father, but I don't know. I agree that it doesn't make sense. He's made more money under me than he ever did under my father. Up until a few days ago, I barely taxed him. Both Andy and Niko said he's gotten greedy, but there must be a reason for it."

Ivan tapped the side of his nose. "Is he sampling his product?"

"I wouldn't have been surprised if Anthony was. Is. But I don't know about Salvadori. Seems out of character, but four days ago I would've said him trying to take over the city was out of character as well."

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We all sat in silence for a few minutes, contemplating what to do next. "Let's see what the other bosses have to say before we make a plan."

"Agreed," they both said.

I looked at my watch. I didn't have another meeting for two hours. I decided to hit the gym and beat the s hit out of a punching bag for a while to clear my head.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 50

Chapter Fifty

Adrik

The rest of the day went by quickly. Before I left for the evening, I stopped by to see both Ms. Jackson and Mr. Turner and make sure they were both settling into their new accommodations. I made arrangements for Sephie's surprise the following day. They were eager to see her again and I found myself once again anxiously anticipating her reaction. Everything was ready.

We drove to the house. The vehicle had barely stopped, and I was already opening the door to get out. I couldn't wait to see her, to hold her, to kiss her. The house was quiet when I walked in. I walked toward the kitchen. Tori was working on dinner. She looked up and saw me and just pointed to the back of the house.

I quickly walked through the back room and out to the patio. I spotted her and Misha walking back from the gardens. She was carrying a handful of flowers that she'd cut, listening intently to what Misha was telling her. She smiled big at something he said, and my heart stopped. Her smile made me forget everything from earlier in the day. They got almost to the pool before she spotted me. As soon as she did, her face lit up again and she smiled even bigger at me.

"Did you bring me flowers, solnishko?" I asked, smirking.

"I did. I thought the house could use some color," she said as she inhaled the floral scent. "And some fragrance. You boys stink." She winked at me.

From behind her, Misha said, "I heard that!".

She laughed, turning to him, and asking him to take the flowers inside for her. Then she turned back to me and slowly wrapped her arms around my waist, pulling me closer to her. "Hi."

I kissed her forehead. "Hi," I said, wrapping my arms around her, inhaling her scent as she leaned against me. All the tension started to leave my body as soon as I felt her touch.

"You had a rough day, huh?" she asked, looking up at me.

I gazed into her eyes for a moment, admiring every little detail of her face and brushing a curl from her face. I leaned down and pressed my lips to hers, needing her to help me relax even more. Without a word, she stood on her toes, her arms wrapping around the back of my neck. She pressed her body even closer to mine and kissed me passionately.

My mind returning to the night before and what she looked and felt like beneath me. I felt myself starting to get fully aroused and stopped the kiss. Before I could say anything, she caressed the side of my face. "Wanna tell me about it while you change, or you don't want to talk about it right now?"

"I could think of a better option," I said as I pressed my hips into hers.

"How much time do we have before dinner? Wait. Doesn't matter. I have an idea," she said as she pulled me toward the house quickly. She practically ran up the back stairs, pulling me along with her.

Once we were in the bedroom, she made quick work of my shirt, throwing it on the floor. Her hands worked feverishly on my belt and pants. I stepped out of my shoes so I could take my pants off just as she dropped to her knees in front of me. "Whoa, Sephie are you sure?" I asked as she was pulling off my boxer briefs, freeing my hard cock.

She looked up at me, slightly confused. Instead of answering, she just looked at me as she grabbed my cock in one hand, licking the tip of it.

I sucked in a breath. I felt her hot breath as she opened her mouth and slowly took my cock in her mouth. I moaned as she started moving up and down, working her tongue along the shaft. My hands went to her hair as she increased the rhythm. I was so turned on by her that I knew I wasn't going to last long.

She started to use one of her hands along with her mouth and I felt myself getting close. "Sephie, you're going to make me cum."

I could feel the vibration of her moan on my cock. "Fuck, Sephie. You're a goddess." I inched closer and closer as her lips were tight around me, her tongue slowly working up and down my entire length. Her other hand grabbed my hip to steady herself. I warned her right before I exploded in her mouth. She stilled until I stopped twitching, then stood up, wiping the tiniest bit of cum from the corner of her mouth.

I stood, almost frozen. Completely stunned at what had just happened. I could count on one hand how many times a woman has offered to do that for me.

"You should try breathing," she whispered in my ear as she kissed my cheek.

I exhaled, still not knowing what to say. She walked to the bed and sat on the edge. She looked at me with a somewhat worried expression. "Are you okay? Did I break you?"

I opened my mouth to say something and stopped, still not sure what to say. I walked to my closet to grab a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt. When I walked out, she looked more worried.

"Should I not have done that?"

I walked to her, pulling her to her feet in front of me. I kissed her neck, biting gently the way I knew she liked. "Please do that anytime the desire arises."

She pushed me away, but she was smiling. "You scared me! I thought I did something wrong!"

"I'm sorry. I was stunned. I…I haven't had a woman ever do that for me…like that," I said, running my hand through my hair. I looked down at the floor. I could feel myself blushing.

I felt her hands on my chest, slide up to my chin, making me look at her. "I've never done that for a man before, so it's a first for both of us." She smiled as she kissed me sweetly.

"You're amazing. I can't get enough of you."

"I hope you never do."

"Come. Let's eat. You're going to need all your strength later," I said leading her from the bedroom.

Chapter Fifty-One

Sephie

I felt Adrik stir next to me. I groaned a little as I didn't want it to be morning yet. He made sure that I would have a hard time walking today. He was insatiable last night. I loved every minute of it, but I was paying for it now. My body did things and felt things that I didn't know was possible. I felt his warm hands on my body, leaning into his touch.

"Good morning, my love," he said as he kissed my shoulder. [hid my face in the pillow, not wanting to open my eyes yet. I felt his breath on my shoulder as he laughed. "You must get up today, solnishko. Your surprise is ready."

I picked my head up and looked at him. "Where is it? Can you bring it to me? I don't think I can walk today. I think you broke me." He laughed as he ran his hands over my body. He rolled me onto my back, and I felt him above me, leaving kisses down my neck and chest. "If I agree to carry you everywhere, does that mean I can have you again this morning?"

He ran his hands over my breasts down my stomach to my hip. He pulled one leg up and over his hips as he leaned down and kissed my lips.

"I'm listening." I said. I felt him lower himself as he pressed his hips to mine. I could feel his hard coc k pressing against my slit. I tried to hold it in, but I moaned quietly. That was all the encouragement he needed. I gasped as he slid inside me, still needing a moment to adjust to his size. He stilled and kissed me. As soon as I relaxed, he started moving, slowly, gently at first. He kept the pace slow, but started to increase the intensity of his thrusts. It was exactly the thing that would make me have an o*gasm every single time. I was close to the edge almost right away. It was like he knew exactly what to do every time to make me o*gasm, like he was reading my mind.

My breaths quickened as he slowly increased the rhythm. Wrapping my legs tighter around him, I threw my head back against the bed, not able to contain my loud moans as he drilled into me, sending me over the edge. My hips met his with each thrust, pushing him deeper inside me. I grabbed onto him as I felt my o*gasm explode, causing him to release as well, both of us breathing hard, unable to move.

He was the first to move. He kissed my lips, then got up from the bed. "Wait here," he said as he walked to the bathroom. I heard him turn the shower on. I wasn't sure why he felt the need to tell me to stay. No way was I moving voluntarily right now. I closed my eyes, still riding the high of morning se x.

I felt his arms underneath me as he picked me up and carried me to the bathroom. He walked me into the shower and gently set me down under the warm water. "This will help your sore muscles," he said as he grabbed the soap and started to wash me. I closed my eyes and leaned into his touch. I loved the way his hands felt on my body. He gently guided me to the water so he could rinse me and get my hair wet. I felt him massage the shampoo into my hair, taking extra care to massage my scalp before rinsing it and doing the same with the conditioner. He quickly washed himself, then wrapped me in a towel. He picked me up again and carried me to the closet so I could get dressed.

The warm shower did help loosen me up. I might be able to walk today, after all.

He carried me downstairs to breakfast. The smell of bacon making my stomach growl as we were coming down the stairs.

"Somebody worked up an appetite," he said, with his s**y smirk. I hid my face against his shoulder.

There was only Tori and Andrei in the kitchen when we walked in. It was still early. Adrik put me down on one of the chairs at the bar to the island. Andrei smiled when he saw me, "good morning, spider monkey."

"Morning, Bubba," I said smiling back. I caught Tori frown out of the corner of my eye. She turned her back and I gave Andrei a serious look, pointing to Tori. He rolled his eyes and shrugged his shoulders.

Adrik saw our exchange and said something to Andrei in Russian. Andrei replied and they both nodded. Adrik winked at me, with a devilish grin.

Viktor walked into the kitchen, still looking half asleep. He walked to me and hugged me, sitting down next to me. "Good morning, sestrichka."

"Viktor, you look like s hit, buddy. Did you not sleep last night?"

He shook his head no. "Coffee. I need coffee."

I went to stand up to get him some coffee, but Adrik put his hand on my shoulder. He whispered in my ear, "we made a deal, remember?" as he walked to get Viktor a cup of coffee. I felt my cheeks blush.

As he was getting coffee for Viktor, the other three guys showed up, looking only slightly more rested than Viktor.

"Are you guys having a party down here at night? Did you not invite me? Rude," I said, crossing my arms across my chest.

Ivan grumbled. Viktor said, "is Misha's fault. He's never seen The Evil Dead trilogy, so we stayed up to watch them all last night."

"Worth it." I laughed at them, as Misha nodded and winked at me.

After morning workouts were completed and everyone had freshly showered, Adrik asked Viktor to get the vehicles ready to leave.

"Who's the lucky guy that gets to stay with me today?" I asked, walking to his side.

He smiled down at me. "You're coming too," he said, pulling me to him.

"I am? Really??" I started to get slightly excited about being able to leave the house after almost a week stuck there.

"Your surprise is waiting. It can't come to you; you must go to it." He kissed my forehead just as Viktor and Stephen were pulling up in front of the house. He took my hand and led me to the SUV that Viktor was driving, opening the back door for me. I hopped in and slid over so that he could get in beside me. Ivan got in the front seat, while Andrei and Misha got in the vehicle with Stephen.

"Where are we going?" I asked. Adrik's arm around me, pulling me closer to him.

"That would ruin the surprise, my love. You will see," he said as both vehicles pulled away from the house.

Chapter Fifty-Two

Sephie

We drove away from the house and closer to the heart of the city. This area of downtown wasn't too far from the restaurant worked at, but I didn't have much reason to come here I would sometimes run through downtown when I was waiting for Grant to pass out. The buildings got taller and the people more numerous on the sidewalks. We passed by a small café, with a giant sign above it that read "Vinny's

"Hey, is that the best sandwich shop ever?" I asked as we drove by.

"The one and only," Viktor said from the front seat.

A few blocks later and we were pulling into an underground parking garage. I was trying to pay attention to where we were, but honestly, I had no clue. There was so much to look at, it was hard to keep track of everything. We parked, the other vehicle parked next to us. Everyone headed toward the elevators. There were three to choose from. We took the one that was by itself, away from the other two.

In the parking garage and in the elevator, the guys essentially surrounded us. Two in front, three in back, all times. Adrik had his arm around me, so I just walked with him, but it felt like we were moving as a unit and not seven separate people.

During the elevator ride up, I noticed that all the guys had smirks on their faces. Like they were all privy to a joke that I hadn't heard yet. It made me wonder what was coming once those elevator doors opened. We stopped at the next to top floor and everyone got off the elevator, except me and Adrik.

"Give us a call when you're ready," Viktor said as they all exited the elevator.

I looked at Adrik, completely confused. He just pulled me closer as the elevator doors closed. "One more floor and you'll see," he said.

As the elevator doors opened, we were met with two guards, who both nodded at Adrik. We walked down a short hallway to another door. As he opened the door, he smiled at me, and motioned for me to walk through the door.

When I walked through the door, I could see that we were in a penthouse. There was a very spacious, very open floor plan, with incredible views of the city in every direction. I stood in one spot, just taking in the views, as well as the layout of the penthouse. My eye caught a familiar picture frame next to one of the couches. I walked to it, picking up one of the few pictures I had of my mother and me. I felt tears threatening to fall as I turned to Adrik.

"I don't understand."

"This is where you will live now, assuming you want to, of course. You'll be closer to your friends, and I can see you throughout the day here too."

"You live here?" I said, still astonished.

"Da. This is where I spend most of my time. This is my building. The lower floors are offices and apartments. The top three floors are restricted to only my people. You'll be safe here. I had the guys pick up the rest of your stuff from your apartment and bring it here. Please don't be mad, but I left your shitty furniture," he said, running his hand through his hair.

"I can't believe you would not want my very expensive thrift store furniture in this place." I said, still trying to choke back tears, but trying to smile through it.

He walked to my side, wrapping his arm around me. "You can leave whenever you want, just please take at least one of the guys with you when you go. We still don't think going back to work is a good idea, but you can at least see your Friends again. I wish you could walk freely once again, but I still don't trust this situation. There's more to it that we don't know yet. I would die if something were to happen to you," he said, kissing my temple and holding me close.

I stared at the picture in my hands, not sure what to say, still fighting tears. I was so happy that I could be closer to Max, and I would be able to see Ms. Jackson and Mr. Turner again, even if it meant I had to take one of the guys with me. Ms. Jackson would be happy about that. I was so touched that he thought things through enough that he had the guys get my stuff from my apartment. I didn't have much, but a few things were very valuable, if only to me. I looked up at him, tears still welling up in my eyes.

"Please tell me those are happy tears?" he asked, his face showing his nervousness at my reaction.

I put the picture down and wrapped my arms around him, burying my face in his chest. I just nodded my head as I fought back the tears. After I gained control, I looked up at him, a few tears still in my eyes. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

He wiped the last few tears from my eyes and kissed my lips gently. "I will give you the world, solnishko."

As I stood looking at him, looking down at me with nothing but love and adoration in his eyes, I realized that I loved this man. I was hopelessly falling in love with him. I never wanted to go another day without him.

"Come. You haven't seen everything yet," he said, pulling me with him to show me the rest of the penthouse.

I couldn't get over the views of the city as we walked through the penthouse. "This must be beautiful at night," I said, staring out the windows as he pulled me through the penthouse.

"I can't wait for you to see it tonight," he said. He proceeded to show me everything the penthouse had to offer, stopping at his bedroom. When he showed me the closet, he motioned for me to walk inside. When I walked in, all my clothes from my apartment were hanging in one section of the closet, with space for more.

"You did this?" I said, smiling at him.

"Well, not me technically, but I told someone to do it," he said, sheepishly.

I walked to him. I placed my hands on his chest, as his arms circled my waist. "Thank you," I said. "Thank you for keeping me safe and for thinking of the little things that I missed from my life. Thank you for allowing me in your life. Thank you for trusting me enough that first night to tell me your name."

He had a lazy smile on his face as he looked at me. "So, you're happy with it?"

"Very."

"Good. Because it's not over yet. There's more to the surprise later."

"More? What else could there possibly be?"

He grinned at me. "You'll see. Now, do you want to see the two floors underneath this one?"

"I want to see everything you want to show me."

Chapter Fifty-Three

Sephie

We explored the next two floors below his penthouse. There was, of course, a full gym here too. Walking through the gym, I asked, “where’s the basketball court in this one?”

He laughed. “No basketball court here. Only at the house.”

“How do you guys manage. Like seriously. Take me back to the house. I can’t live under these conditions.” It was so hard to get that out with a straight face, but I managed. He turned to me, worried that I was serious. Just the look of worry on his face made me lose it. I started laughing.

He pushed me gently. “You worried me!”

We finished the official tour around lunchtime. On his private elevator back up to his penthouse, he asked “now, would you like to go somewhere for lunch?”

“Like actually go somewhere? We can do that?”

“We can do whatever we please, solnishko. What would you like?”

My mind immediately went to Vinny’s and their life-changing sandwiches. “Can we go to Vinny’s so I can actually thank them in person for changing my life with their sandwiches?”

He laughed. “Of course. The guys will be so happy. They can’t get enough of that place,” he said as he pulled me to him. He kissed me, saying, “and I can’t get enough of you,” against my lips.

I rested my head against his chest, inhaling his scent. My arms hugged him tighter as I was thinking about how lucky I was.

Our trip to Vinny’s was not what I would consider normal, but they all acted like it was nothing. I was going to have to get used to having six men surrounding me in public, apparently. Most people were somewhat used to seeing Adrik with his guards, but the addition of me was clearly noteworthy, judging by the number of looks we got walking around. We left through the lobby, as they had pulled the vehicles out in front of the building, and we couldn’t even get through the lobby without everyone stopping and staring. I was starting to feel very self-conscious as we got in the SUV.

Ivan turned from the driver’s seat, grinning at me, “you just successfully smashed all the rumors that he’s gay. He hasn’t been seen in public with a woman in a few years.” He winked at me.

“I feel like I should’ve given them a show,” I said, rolling my eyes.

The café was much better. It was small, without too many people inside, so we had a good time during lunch. We were laughing and joking, as usual. Vinny arrived as we were leaving. He stopped to address Adrik. “Good day, sir. I’m pleased you’ve come today. And with such a gorgeous woman, too!” he said as he looked at me.

I smiled at him. “You must be Vinny?”

“Si, bella.”

“You are single-handedly responsible for making me have to workout more, but my stomach is so grateful for it,” I said, offering my hand to him.

“Hey, we’re Italian. We can’t help but feed everyone,” he said pulling me into a hug instead of shaking my hand. I was surprised by it, but I felt Adrik’s hand on my lower back. “You come back often, bella. Good marketing to see a beautiful woman eating at my shop,” he said winking at me and giving Adrik the thumbs up.

Viktor, with his serious, deep voice, said, “careful what you wish for, Vinny. This girl eats as much as we do.”

“Ah, she’s welcome. You’re all welcome here as much as you like. I’m so grateful to you, sir,” he said, shaking Adrik’s hand.

Adrik and I spent the next few hours by ourselves in the penthouse. In short, it was glorious to spend time with him during the day. We talked, we laughed, we acted like two people falling in love with each other.

At precisely 5:00, he stood up from the couch and extended his hand to me. “Come, time for the next part of your surprise.”

He led me to the elevator and pushed the button for the 5th floor. “Where are we going?” I asked.

He smiled down at me, “you’ll see.”

When the elevator doors opened, he pulled me down the hallway, made one right turn and stood in front of an apartment door.

“Knock,” he said.

I knocked on the door, only to have Mr. Turner answer the door. “Mr. Turner!” I yelled, throwing my arms around his neck.

“Miss Sephie! I’m so happy to see you again!” he said, as he hugged me back.

“How? Why? You live here now?” I asked, confused. I hadn’t noticed that Adrik had stepped across the hallway and knocked on the door across the hall from Mr. Turner’s.

“He lives here now and so do I,” I heard a familiar voice from behind me say. I turned to find Ms. Jackson standing in her doorway. I rushed to her and gave her a hug as well. “Oh, Ms. Jackson! I’m so happy to see you!” I could feel the happy tears welling in my eyes at getting to see them both again, knowing they were both okay.

“Well, come in, child. Let me show you around,” Ms. Jackson said, grabbing my hand in hers. She looked at Adrik and Mr. Turner. “You two might as well come too. It’ll be an open house.”

“But how though?” I asked Ms. Jackson quietly as we walked through her apartment. Mr. Turner and Adrik chose to remain in her front room as she showed me the rest of her place.

“Do you believe me now that that man is in love with you?” she asked.

“He did this?”

She nodded her head. “He came to both of us, told us that you missed us, and asked if we would move here to be closer to you. He wants nothing more than for you to be happy, sweet girl.”

I stood still for a moment, in complete disbelief. “I can’t believe he did this for me.”

“Do you believe me now, child? He’ll give you the moon if you want it. That boy is in deep.”

I stared at her, knowing she was right, but still not able to quite believe it. She reached for my hand and patted it with her other hand. “You’re starting to believe it, but you’re also starting to feel the same for him, aren’t you?”

I nodded my head. “How could I not?”

“Smart girl. You offer him something that he’s never had before. He’ll die to protect it. To protect you. I was worried about you when you first left. I thought you’d gotten in over your head, but I couldn’t come up with a better solution. When he came to talk to me about coming here, I knew I was worrying about nothing.” She paused for a moment.

“Does he know?”

I knew what she was asking. “I told him. He’s seen the scars. I even told him you stitched me up and everything you did for me. Ms. Jackson, he never looked at me differently. Not once.”

“Do you believe me now, child?” she asked, a small smile on her face.

I smiled at her, realizing she was helping me piece together everything. I hugged her. “I missed you.”

She hugged me back, “and I you, child.”

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 54

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Chapter Fifty-Four

Sephie

We walked back to the front of the apartment to find Adrik listening to Mr. Turner tell stories from his time at the hotel. Adrik probably knew most of the people Mr. Turner was talking about. I walked to Adrik. He opened his arm for me as I walked up. I stepped next to him, wrapping my arm around his waist as we stood listening to Mr. Turner's story.

After he finished, Mr. Turner looked at me, smiling. "Miss Sephie, I don't think you'll be needing my services any longer."

I laughed, forgetting that I used to ask Mr. Turner to find me the perfect man while he was at work. Adrik looked between me and Mr. Turner, a confused look on his face. "I used to ask Mr. Turner to please find me the perfect man while he was at work."

Adrik's face softened, as he kissed my forehead. "Turns out I found him while I was at work," I said, hugging him a little tighter. He looked at me, slightly surprised, but quickly masked it.

We spent more time talking to both Ms. Jackson and Mr. Turner. It was starting to get late, for them, so we took our leave and went back upstairs. In the elevator, his phone buzzed in his pocket. He took it out, looking at it.

"The guys are ordering Chinese. Sound good?"

"Yes please!"

He responded to the text, putting his phone back in his pocket. He looked at me, like he was thinking about something. Finally, he said, "the perfect man? Really?" Then he added, "I'm far from perfect, solnishko. I don't want to disappoint you, but I've not been a good man for most of my life." He looked down at the floor.

"You're perfect for me, Adrik. You're good to me. You're good to the people that matter to me. I know who you are. I knew when you walked into the restaurant that night, but when I look at you, I see the good in you." He looked at me, pulling me to him. "You say I've brought light into your life, and maybe that's true, I don't know. But you've made me less afraid of the dark and what's found there."

His lips crashed into mine. He reached over and stopped the elevator, pulling me tightly against him. His kiss was unrelenting, like he was desperate for me. Just when I thought I was going to pass out from lack of oxygen, he stopped with his lips still close to mine, his breath coming heavy. His eyes were closed, like he was trying to gain control of himself. I placed my hands on either side of his face, kissing him gently once more.

Without a word, he reached over and started the elevator again. He pulled me back to him, his thumbs tracing circles on my back as he held me close. I rested my head against his chest. We rode the rest of the way to his penthouse in silence, him holding me close.

The next day went by fast, as I had more to do during the day to keep myself busy. I spent time with Ms. Jackson, along with Andrei, much to her amusement. I also got to spend time with Adrik in the middle of the day when he had a break in his schedule. I could get used to this kind of day.

When he was done for the day, he asked "would you like to go see your friend Max tonight? Is he working? We can go to the restaurant."

"Really? You would go there with me?"

"Of course. You haven't seen him in a week. You should go to see him."

"Oh, thank you! He's going to be so surprised!" I said, hugging his neck.

We walked into the restaurant, with Viktor and Andrei in front, Adrik and I in the middle, and Ivan, Misha, and Stephen bringing up the rear. Max looked up from the bar when Viktor and Andrei stepped inside the door, vaguely recognizing them, but not seeing me behind them yet. When Adrik and I stepped forward, Max saw me and literally jumped over the bar to run to me.

Out of habit, all five bodyguards stepped closer, essentially boxing us in, using their bodies as shields. I laughed and tapped Viktor on the shoulder. "It's Max. He won't hurt me."

"Sorry, sestrichka. Habit," he said, stepping aside.

I stretched up and kissed his cheek. "No need to be sorry. Thank you for being so da mn good at your job," said as I stepped around him to get to Max. He hugged me tight, exclaiming, "I missed you SO much!"

Once he released me, Adrik caught my arm, whispering in my ear. "We'll be right over here. Go, catch up." They all turned to sit at a table close to the door, where they could clearly see the bar and the front door.

I walked with Max back to the bar, so he could get back to work. I got plenty of looks from his fan club as we came back. They had all witnessed Max jumping over the bar to get to me. He pulled me behind the bar, so he could talk to me as he kept working.

"Where have you been, gingersnap?"

"Um, somewhere safe. I'm not far from here now, though, so we can hang out again."

He turned his back to the customers at the bar, so they wouldn't hear him. "Are you okay? Like for real? They didn't kidnap you or anything?"

I laughed. "I mean, it depends on your definition of kidnap, I guess. I'm fine, Maximus. More than fine. I'm great."

He looked at me, skeptically at first, but he could see the happiness on my face, so he relaxed. "Okay, well give me the safe word at any point if you need to."

"Max, I don't think I'll be saying 'Saskatchewan' anytime soon."

"You just said it! You're in trouble, I knew it!!"

I laughed, pushing him away from me. As he went back to making drinks, I stepped beside him, leaning into his shoulder. "I missed you, Max."

"It's because of my face, isn't it?" He slammed an ice cube into a glass. "Da mmit, these devastatingly good looks are a curse!"

Chapter Fifty-Six

Misha

Three Martha Later

“Are we taking the usual route, boss?” I asked Sephie as we both stretched for our morning run. Since I’d been running with her regularly now, I was able to keep up with her better. She was still faster than I was. I did make the mistake of testing that out a few weeks ago and I still regret it. I’m not sure my ego will ever recover.

“I think so. I like being able to see Mr. Turner at work on the way back here.”

“You got it. You’re sure you don’t want to eat something before we go?” I asked. She had been doing fasted cardio in the morning, trying to lose a few pounds. I didn’t see where those pounds were that she needed to lose, but I knew better than to argue with a woman over these matters.

“I’m sure. It’s not as bad as it sounds. And there’s that da mn pala, ball, extravaganza thing coming up in a few weeks. I have to like wear a dress for that and I ha te wearing dresses and being in public. Everyone stares. I’ll be da mned if they can say I’m f at while they’re all staring at me.”

I laughed, shaking my head. I always found it funny that men were constantly trying to be bigger while women were constantly trying to be smaller.

“You will look great, gazelle. And just think about all the sandwiches from Vinny’s that you’ll be able to eat after it’s over.”

.

“Someone should warn that poor man. He’s going to go hanaupt feeding me after that event,” she said, a very serious look on her face. She could definitely pack the food away, esperally for a girl. It was one of the things we all loved about her. She was always down for a food run whenever we got to stay with her. She always worked out with us, too. She was practically one of us.

We finished stretching and set out on our usual route. Over the past couple of months, we’d all settled into somewhat of a routine. It was so much easier with her at the penthouse, We didn’t have to fight over who got to stay with her. We would take turns throughout the day and we each had found unique things that we did with her. I would run with het. Andrei was basically her trainer now, Ĭvan was teaching her how to drive defensively, Viktor was teaching her how to defend herself, and Stephen was teaching her how to sh oot. She took an interest in each of us as an individual and his point, she likely knew more about each of us than Adrik did, even though we’d been with him much longer. We all had demons from the past and in her own way, she was helping us deal with that. She was always there to make everything mate fun.

Woman’s touch, I suppose. She was different from any woman any of us had known before. We all loved her and loved being around her. She would come hang out with us if Adrik had a late meeting or needed to work late.

As we ran, I was silently grateful we were back at the penthouse and not at the house. She always wanted to take the kong way around the lake when we were at the house, and I would suffer every time. The route we took through the city wasn’t nearly as inng I still had some improvements to work on before I could easily keep up with her on the long

Funs

neated the last leg of our route, the hotel that Mr. Turner worked at coming into view as we ran down the street

Only a few more blocks to go now.

We passed by the hotel, stopping briefly to say “good morning” to Mr. Turner. As we left the hotel and continued on our way, I got a bad feeling. I made sure to keep an eye on Sephie beside me, while trying to weave in and out of pedestrian traffic. There were suddenly a lot of people on the sidewalks. I was just about to stop her so I could keep her closer to me when I felt someone try to tackle me from my left side. Just as I was pushed to the side, I heard her

scream behind me.

S hit. They’re going to try and grab her.

The man that tackled me was still trying to get me to the ground but couldn’t. He still had his arms around mine. I still had full use of my legs and I was taller than him, so I was using that to my advantage. He had pushed me closer to the buildings, so I turned and shoved him into the building as hard as I could. The shock of the impact made him loosen his grip enough that I could get my arms free. I elbowed him in the face, causing him to stumble. I looked to find Sephie. She was fighting with her attacker. The guy that had tackled me was coming back for more. He looked like he wasn’t completely with it, somehow. His eyes were having trouble focusing.

I punched him in the face as hard as I could. His body immediately going limp and falling to the ground. I ran to Sephie, who had her attacker on the ground. She was straddling him, just letting her fists fly in this guy’s face. I could tell she was pi ssed. I’d sparred with her a few times. If you pushed her to the point of anger, you better be ready for a fight. Clearly this guy was not prepared.

I caught her arm and pulled her off him. He was unconscious. He wasn’t going anywhere. I stood her up and looked her over. While my attacker couldn’t get me to the ground, hers took her down immediately. She had road rash down one side and she had clearly hit her head. She was bleeding from a cut above her eyebrow. Adrik was going to be so pi ssed at me.

“Sephie, look at me. How bad are you hurt?” I asked, holding both of her shoulders. She didn’t answer. She just kept staring at the guy on the sidewalk as she was trying to catch her breath.

Mr. Turner, who had seen everything, ran to us. “Are you guys okay? Do you want me to call an ambulance?”

“No, Mr. Turner. I’m calling my people. We’ll take care of it. But thank you.” I turned to look at Sephie, who was still

hurt?” breathing hard, her face red, still pi ssed. “Gazelle? Talk to me. How bad are you

She finally looked at me and I could see the switch flip in her head. “I’m okay. My head hurts, but I’m okay.”

I exhaled, taking my phone from my pocket. I had Viktor on speed dial. He answered on the first ring. He knew we were out and the only reason I would be calling was not a good one.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

Misha

“My location. Get here now. Bring everyone.” I hung up the phone, slipping it back in my pocket. I still had one hand on Sephie, trying to make sure she stayed with me. I was concerned about her hitting her head. I didn’t want her to pass out. I knew the adrenaline rush was eventually going to wear off and didn’t want her to crash completely.

The guys were there within minutes. The two men who attacked us had their hands bound behind their backs and were thrown in the back of an SUV. Viktor talked to Mr. Turner, as he had seen everything happen. A few passersby had stopped to help and gave their version of events.

We loaded up and dr ove back to the penthouse. On the way to the elevator, Sephie started to stumble. She grabbed Ivan’s arm as she was going down. He caught her and carried her straight back to the SUV, taking her to the hospital right away. I jumped in the back with her. I felt responsible for her since this had happened on my watch. I cradled her head on my lap, monitoring her breathing on our short ride to the hospital.

Ivan made it in record time, pulling up to the ER. I got out, pulling her out and running inside with her. I was starting to get worried that she hadn’t woken up by now. Anytime one of us had passed out from a bl ow to the head, we usually woke up a few minutes later. It had already been 8 minutes and she was still out.

I found a doctor right away who directed me into a room. It probably helped our case that she was covered with blood. I laid her on a bed in the middle of the room. The doctor began checking her over, asking me what happened. I explained about the attack and that she had passed out after.

“She’s probably got a major concussion, but we’re going to run some tests to make sure there’s not more going on in there. She’s got a pretty good cut above her eye. She hit her head hard,” the doctor said, checking the rest of her. Ivan. walked into the room, looking more worried than I’d ever seen him.

He spoke to me in Russian, so no one else could understand us. “What the fu ck happened?”

“It was a setup. It had to be. Suddenly, there were a ton of people on the sidewalk, just past the hotel. I was just about to stop her so I could keep a closer eye on her when I got tackled from behind. But they went for her at the exact same time. They had to have been waiting for us to pass. The extra people were cover for them.”

“Fu ck. It’s been so quiet we got complacent. I was afraid something like this was going to happen. Boss is going to be pi ssed.”

“Don’t remind me,” I said, running my hand through my hair. I realized I had Sephie’s blood on my hand, but I didn’t care. “He’s going to fire me. I know it. I had a bad feeling just as we left the hotel too. I knew something was about to happen.”

“You did good, kid. Don’t worry about Boss. He’ll surprise you. Just as long as the princess doesn’t d ie.”

It was like she understood him, because just as Ivan said that Sephie started to wake up. The doctor had stepped out to order her tests. I rushed to her, grabbing her hand. “Sephie! Can you hear me?”

She lightly squeezed my hand. “Why is it so fuc king bright in here?”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. I was so relieved. “Gazelle. You passed out. You’re in the hospital.”

“Makes more sense than the parking garage smelling like antiseptic,” she said trying to cover her eyes with her arm. “Why does my head feel like it’s being split open?*

I looked to Ivan, slightly worried. He walked to her side. “Princess, do you remember what happened?” He gently put a hand on her stomach.

“Um, mostly. Did I punch a guy?”

We both laughed. “Yes, Sephie. Yes, you did. Multiple times, even,” I said.

“He might need facial reconstructive surgery you punched him so many times,” Ivan said, patting her stomach.

“Goddammit why am I so hungry?” she asked.

I laughed again. “I told you that you should’ve eaten something before we went for a run.”

“Why didn’t I listen to you?” she groaned.

I patted her hand. “I don’t know, gazelle. They want to do more tests on you, but then we will get you food as soon as possible.”

Ivan heard a commotion outside the room we were in. He looked at me before stepping out of the room to see what was happening. He disappeared for a moment, leaving me with Sephie. He returned with Viktor, Andrei, and Adrik. As soon as Adrik’s eyes landed on Sephie, he went from being angry to relieved to worried in an instant. He rushed to her. I stepped out of the way so he could grab her hand that I had been holding so she wouldn’t have to uncover her eyes.

“Solnishko,” he said quietly.

“Adrik?” she asked quietly, not taking her hand from her eyes. He leaned down to her and whispered something in her ear that only she could hear. It brought a smile to her face.

The doctor came back in, somewhat surprised at the number of people in the room. He cleared his throat. “We’d like to take her upstairs to run a quick test to make sure there’s not further damage to her sk ull and her brain.”

“Is it this fuc king bright up there? Because that’s gonna be a no from me if it is,” Sephie said.

The doctor was unaware that she had woken up. “Oh, you’re awake. Good. Very good. Although, I still think it’s a good idea to run the tests to make sure. We can, uh, adjust the lights for you. That’s a common complaint for head injuries.”

Adrik looked at the doctor. He could be very intimidating when he wanted to be. The doctor shrunk back, looking from Adrik to the rest of us.

Sephie lifted her head and peeked through her hand at the scene in the room, when the room went silent. “Don’t worry about them, doc. They’ll only k ill you if I d ie upstairs.” She laid her head back down.

The doctor scratched his head, “okay then. Well, we should get on with it.” He started to pull her bed toward the door. A nurse showed up to help him push her toward the elevators down the hall.

We all stood in the hallway, waiting for the doctor to come back with any news on her condition. Speaking in Russian, Adrik stood in front of me, “tell me everything that happened.”

“It was a trap, Boss. We ran our usual route, so she could stop by and say hi to Mr. Turner. After we left the hotel, there was suddenly a ton of people on the sidewalk. I was just about to stop her so I could keep her close to me when I got hit. She got hit at the same time. The guy that hit me was trying to take me down to the ground, but I managed to stay upright. I shoved him into the wall to get him off me. He came back for me, but I punched him and that’s when he passed out. I’m guessing the other guy was able to get Sephie to the ground and that’s where she hit her head. I had to pull her off him. She rearranged that guy’s face. He pi ssed her off, sir. I’ve never seen her so angry. After, she was lucid. She said she was fine until we got back to the parking garage. We were walking to the elevators, and she started to go down. She grabbed Ivan’s arm and he caught her. We rushed her here.”

He didn’t say a word, which made me nervous. He stared at me for a moment, but then patted me on the shoulder. “You did good, Misha.”

He turned to pace the hallway and I exhaled loudly. The other three guys looked at me, knowingly; all three nodded to me. I still felt responsible for this.

More time passed and the doctor finally came back. We all walked to him quickly, causing him to take a step back and put his hands out. “Whoa, easy fellas. She’s fine. She’s going to be fine. She has a really good concussion, but nothing more. They’re stitching the cut above her eyebrow right now and then she’ll be back down. Keep her quiet and in low light for the next two weeks. Try to keep external stimuli to a minimum. That means TV, radio, all of it. Her brain needs time to heal.”

Adrik visibly relaxed at the doctor’s words. He extended his hand to the doctor. “Thank you, doctor.”

“Thank
you
for not killing me,” the doctor said smiling nervously. “She’ll be down in just a few minutes, and you can take her home.”

I leaned against the wall, closing my eyes. I was relieved she was okay and could go home. I felt Viktor’s hand on my shoulder. “It could’ve been any one of us, kid. Don’t stress. You did good.”

“It’s still my fault she got hurt. I should’ve stopped her sooner. I could’ve seen it coming.”

“Don’t do that. Don’t play the ‘what if’ game. You’ll drive yourself crazy playing out alternate scenarios. You did what you needed to do. She did too. They weren’t expecting her to fight back, I’m sure. We just have to be ready for the next time, because there will be a next time.”

I nodded. I had a feeling this was only the beginning.

Sephie came down the hallway, in a wheelchair, her hands still covering her eyes. When the nurse stopped in front of us, she started to get up from the wheelchair. The nurse put her hand on Sephie’s shoulder to stop her from getting up. Without even opening her eyes, she just said, “Ghost?”

He was there in a second. “Can you take me home, please?” she asked as she extended an arm toward him, not opening her eyes. Without hesitation, he reached down and scooped her out of the wheelchair. We all walked toward the door, leaving the nurse with her wheelchair, looking completely stunned.

Sephie hid her face against Adrik’s shoulder as we walked to the vehicles. He put her in the backseat and removed his shirt before getting in beside her. He draped his shirt over her head to make the ride home darker.

I found myself admiring him. He was so attuned to her needs. I’d never seen anything like it.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 58

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Sephie

The ride back from the hospital was somewhat excruciating. They had given me painkillers at the hospital before I left. but they hadn’t kicked in yet and my head was pounding. Adrik had taken his shirt off before climbing into the backseat with me and thrown it over my head to make it darker for me. I kept the shirt over my head and hid my face in his chest for the entire ride. His arm stayed securely around me, keeping me stable, while his thumb gently traced circles on my hip. Once in the parking garage, I peeked out from under his shirt as he carried me to the elevator. The light wasn’t as bright, so I stole a look up at him. His face was tight, pensive. He was worried. Or angry. Or both.

He took me straight to the bedroom and laid me on the bed. I felt the bed dip as he sat beside me.

“What can I do, Persephone? What do you need most right now?” he asked, concern evident in his voice.

I groaned. “Once the painkillers kick in and my head stops pounding, I’ll be fine.”

He took my hands in his. I could tell he was looking them over. I had a memory flash from right after the incident. I looked at my hands, noticing the bruises already appearing on my knuckles. I had another flash, of something familiar, but I couldn’t remember clearly. It was like a déjà vu moment, where I had been there before.

“How is Misha?” I asked, still not opening my eyes.

I felt his hand on my stomach. “You can open your eyes, solnishko. I closed the windows.”

“I’m sorry, you did what?”

“Closed the windows. It should be dark enough in here, but if it’s still too much, I’ll close the last one all the way.”

I opened my eyes, to almost complete darkness. “How did I not know this was a thing that could happen?”

He chuckled. “I rarely use them, but there are blinds in all the windows. I enjoy the view, so I leave the windows open most of the time. I never thought about it until now.”

I sat up slightly. The painkillers were beginning to work so my head was starting to pound less aggressively.

“Is good?” he asked.

“Much better, thank you. Now, how is Misha? Are you angry with him? Please don’t be angry with him. I can’t remember everything yet, but I know it wasn’t his fault.”

He stared at me for a moment. His lips curled into a small smile. “You’re covered in blood, some of which probably isn’t yours, you just left the hospital and you’ve been ordered to basically bed rest for two weeks.” He reached up and very lightly ran his finger down the side of my face. “And you have stitches in your beautiful face, but you’re worried about Misha and whether I’m angry with him?”

“Basically, yes.”

“Misha is fine, love. He feels terrible about what happened, but it wasn’t his fault, like you said. He did everything he could. That is all I could ever ask.” He leaned down and kissed my lips so gently that I almost didn’t feel his lips on mine. Those painkillers must be kicking in faster now,

“Good. I feel like there’s something I’m forgetting about it though. Something important.” I thought for a moment. “Something felt familiar about it, but I can’t place it.”

“Familiar how?” he asked, his eyebrow raised.

“I’m not sure yet. It was like a feeling of déjà vu. Like I’ve seen it before, you know?” I looked at him. My brain was desperately trying to grasp something that was just out of reach.

He thought for a moment. “You should be resting, solnishko. It will come to you. I’ll talk to Misha again about what happened, maybe he can shed some more light on it. We have the men that attacked you, as well. We’ll get answers from them,” he said, cracking his neck to the side. If I didn’t know him, I would think it was scary as h ell, but I found myself slightly turned on by his anger.

How many drugs did they give me again?

He looked me over. “How is your head? Do you feel up to a shower before I put you back to bed?”

I looked down at my clothes. My shirt was red. And sticky. It was originally a wh ite shirt. It was also now torn, along with my shorts. My left leg had road rash on it, as did my left arm and hip. I looked to him, the painkillers now making me feel like I was floating and somewhat giddy, and said, “are you trying to tell me that you don’t want a piece of this right now?” I ran my hands over my beat-up body, for emphasis.

He laughed. “You are amazing. I’ll go turn the shower on,” he said kissing my lips once again. “Wait here. I will help you.” He looked at me sternly as he got up to leave.

While he went to the bathroom, I made a feeble attempt to get up from the bed. As soon as I was upright, the room was spinning. I sat right back down on the bed, trying to make it stop. I felt his hands on my arms and I said, “um, this might be a bad plan. Unless you can make the room stop spinning when I stand up.”

“Stay here. I have an idea.”

I heard him go back to the bathroom. More water running. Suddenly I was very sleepy. I can just take a nap before he comes back. That’ll be ok. I laid back on the bed, my legs still over the side. I vaguely remember him coming back. He pulled me upright and took my clothes off. Then I was in the air, adding to the floating feeling from the painkillers, then I was being submerged in warm water.

My eyes were barely able to stay open, but I knew I was in his arms. I just snuggled close to him, and I didn’t care about anything else. I felt the vibration of his laugh as I drifted off to sleep.

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Chapter 59

Chapter Fifty-Nine

Sephie

I had no idea what time it was, or what day it was when I finally woke up. It was completely dark in the room, so I couldn't tell if it was day or night. I checked the bed, searching for Adrik. No luck. Just me.

I vaguely remembered not being able to stand up before, so I slowly moved to the side of the bed. I swung my legs over the side of the bed and sat up. The room was stable so far. This was a good sign. I stood slowly. My legs felt weak, but I could stand up. Okay, I can do this. I took a few steps toward the bathroom. So far so good.

I had my arms out in front of me as I couldn't see the bathroom door very well. I found the wall and felt my way to the door. I found the light switch and flinched when I turned on the light. That was a bad idea. I squinted to find my way around the bathroom and do what I needed to do. I stood in front of the mirror. My face was bruised, as I expected it would be, but it wasn't nearly as bad as I thought it was going to be. I took inventory of my body. Adrik had put one of his shirts on me. I pulled it up. My body was multi-colored. I had bruises around my ribs and down my left side. Pretty.

I left the bathroom light on so I could see in the bedroom. I found a pair of panties, a bra, and a pair of shorts and threw those on. I did everything at a snail's pace, but I could manage. I only felt a dull ache in my head as I moved around the bedroom.

When I opened the bedroom door, I could hear voices. I walked down the hallway, walking close to the wall to help steady myself. When I got to the end of the hallway, I could see Adrik and all the guys sitting on the couches. Adrik saw me and rushed to me, picking me up immediately. "Solnishko, what are you doing out of bed? Are you okay?"

"I'm okay. I feel better, somewhat. What time is it?" I asked, settling into his arms as he walked me to the couch.

Misha, with his wide smile, said, "more like what day is it."

I looked at him, confused. "What do you mean?"

He looked at his watch. "You've been asleep for 36 hours now. You slept through the entire day, then most of the next one."

"Shut up." I thought he was playing a trick on me.

"It's true, solnishko," Adrik said as he kissed my cheek. He looked at me, brushing my hair from my face. He still had a look of concern on his face.

"What was in those painkillers?" I said scratching my head. They all laughed at me,

Misha asked, "are you still hungry? You said you were starving in the hospital. I promised to get you food once we got back here, but then you passed out for a day and a half."

I thought for a minute. I really wasn't hungry. My stomach did not feel right. I must've made a funny face, thinking about not wanting to eat, because Misha laughed. "I've never seen you turn down food before. What was in those painkillers??"

Ivan had gotten up to go the kitchen. He came back with water for me. He handed it to me and said, "start with this first. If you can handle water, then you'll be able to eat soon. If water is too much, then you need to wait a little longer for the drugs to leave your system."

"Thank you, Ivan." I took the glass and took a sip. Okay, I was really thirsty. I took a big gulp and Adrik pulled the glass from my lips.

"Easy, love. Go slow or you'll definitely puke it up."

I pushed my bottom lip out but didn't fight him on it. I hated to puke, so I would do whatever was needed to avoid that.

"Can you remember what happened, princess?" Ivan asked me.

I thought for a moment. I nodded my head. "Mostly, I think. We had just left the hotel and Mr. Turner. There were lots of people on the sidewalk like all at once. I remember Misha glanced at me and then the next thing I knew he was going one way and I was going the other. I hit the ground hard, but so did the guy that jumped on me. He kind of faltered and his grip on me loosened. I flipped him off me, like Viktor taught me. As I was getting up, I saw Misha get free from the guy that was on him. I remember being really pissed. I jumped on the guy and started hitting him. There was something familiar about it that I still can't place. Misha pulled me off him and you guys know the rest."

"Familiar how?" Viktor asked. "Familiar in how he acted? How he smelled? How he sounded?"

I thought back to the guy. "He didn't look like he was entirely with it when he attacked me. Like, it was too easy for me to get him off me."

Misha sat up. "I had the same thought. When I got the guy off me the first time and he came back for more, he looked like he was unsteady. Like he was high."

Ivan said, "if they were high, that would explain why neither one of them has woken up yet."

My eyes went wide. "That's what it was! My uncle used to have the same look when he was high on pills and would beat the shit out of me!" I realized too late what I had just said in front of all of them, my hand flying to cover my mouth. Adrik knew, of course, but none of the guys knew about that yet.

Chapter Sixty

Sephie

They all looked at me, then looked quickly to Adrik. He nodded and pulled me closer. “You can show them, solnishko. They won’t look at you differently either,” he whispered to me.

I slowly stood up and raised my shirt up high enough that they could see most of my scars. I heard a few of them inhale sharply. I dropped my shirt and sat down next to Adrik again. He wrapped his arm around me again, pulling me to his side.

I took a deep breath and gave them the abbreviated version. “I was sent to live with my uncle when my mom died, as he was my only family, and I was only 15. He had a drinking problem that later turned into a pill problem. He started to beat me when he started on the pills. I would leave the house for hours when I knew he was high, waiting for him to pass out. That’s how I started running. Sometimes he wouldn’t be passed out when I got back, and he would catch me and beat me. Most of the time it was just his fists and he’d kick me, but the last night he used a whip on me.”

Andrei asked, “how did you get away?”

“I had found that apartment I was in when I met you guys and I was slowly taking my stuff there, planning to just never go back one day. Ms. Jackson had befriended me in that process. Earlier that day, she had seen fresh bruises from the latest beating, and she gave me a pocketknife. It was in my pocket when he had exhausted himself from beating me with the whip. He came back to kick me, and I grabbed his foot and sliced his Achilles tendon so he couldn’t come after me. I stole his car and drove to the apartment. Ms. Jackson stitched me up and helped me out. She sold the car while I was sleeping so he couldn’t find me.” I said, smiling at the thought of her helping me.

They were silent for a minute. Ivan leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “So, about this bingo that she needs a date for…?”

I laughed. “That’s why she means so much to me. I owe her a lot.”

Viktor said, “she can take each of us to bingo every night of the week if she wishes.”

“Where is your uncle now? What happened to him? Can we kill him?” Misha asked.

I smiled at him, getting his wide smile and a wink in return. “I don’t know. I haven’t seen him since that night.”

“We can find him. We will gladly find him,” Stephen said. “I can pick him off from a rooftop somewhere. No one will ever know.”

I looked at him, smiling at his offer of violence on my behalf. “I think he’ll get his Karma on his own. I don’t think any of you need to step in. But I love you all for offering.” Adrik pulled me close and handed me the glass of water again.

We sat in silence for a few minutes. Adrik asked, “you said the pills your uncle took made him violent. Do you remember what it was he took?”

“I don’t know what they were called. I only saw them once or twice. They were pink and purple pills. Like the gel cap kind that you can pull apart and the powder comes out, you know?”

“Did he swallow the pills, snort it, or cook it and inject it?” Ivan asked.

I tried to remember what I’d seen my uncle do. “I’m not sure. I know he swallowed them at first, but I don’t know if he did anything different later on. He had an extremely high tolerance for alcohol, so maybe he developed a tolerance for the pills too? He would pass out for sometimes days at a time after taking them.”

They all looked at each other, like they had just gotten an integral piece of the puzzle. I looked at each of them. “Do you guys know what he was taking?”

“It’s a mixture of three drugs. Dealers started mixing drugs a few years back to try to create different highs for their customers. They call it ‘brawn,” Viktor said. “It makes people feel stronger, but it also makes them more violent. Then their body crashes, which is why your uncle would pass out for a few days after each time. That’s probably why the guys who attacked you are still out. I’d be willing to bet they were on it.”

“The question now is who put them up to it and who gave them the brawn. Most of the city is clear of it now. There’s only a few areas where you can find dealers still willing to make it. Most of the bosses told their dealers to quit making it. Either a few of them didn’t listen or the bosses never actually told them to stop,” Ivan said.

I rested my head on Adrik’s shoulder, suddenly exhausted again. He took the now empty glass of water from me and set it on the table beside the couch. “Come, back to bed for you. We’ll talk about this more in the morning,” he said picking me up off the couch.

I didn’t argue, I just snuggled into his arms as he walked me back to the bedroom. The guys all waving bye as I disappeared down the hallway. He laid me on the bed and walked to the closet, untucking his shirt as he went. I was fighting to stay awake when he got back. “Will you stay with me?” I asked, trying to keep my eyes open.

He climbed into bed beside me, wrapping his arms around me. I sighed, contentedly. “How’s your head? Still have a headache? Do you need more painkillers?”

“No, it’s okay. It’s not bad now. I don’t want to sleep for a day and a half again.”

“I won’t argue with that,” he said holding me tighter. “I missed you.” He pulled me closer, holding me tightly. “You clearly needed to sleep though. I was worried about you.”

I rolled in his arms to face him. My hand went to his face, running my fingers lightly over his facial hair. I was still fighting to stay awake when I felt him kiss my forehead. “Sleep, my love.”

Chapter Sixty-One

Sephie

The next few days were mostly a blur. I was asleep more than I was awake, and I could still barely eat. By the third day, I finally woke up with an appetite. It was the middle of the afternoon when I woke up that day. Adrik was at the kitchen counter, working. He had brought his work upstairs so he could be there if I needed anything. I walked into the kitchen, without having to squint. I was also steadier on my feet. I walked to him, draping my body over his back, hugging his neck.

“Good afternoon, solnishko. How are you feeling?”

“Better now,” I said, kissing his cheek. “I think I can eat now, I’m finally hungry.”

“That’s a good sign. Come, sit. I can make you something.” He pulled up a chair next to his for me to sit.

“You know how to cook?” I was legitimately surprised.

He looked at me with his sexy smirk. “I am capable. Mostly. It won’t be as good as Tori’s or yours, but it’s edible.”

He opened the refrigerator. “What would you like? We have some eggs and bacon.” My stomach growled loud enough that he heard it. “Eggs and bacon it is,” he said setting both items down on the counter.

“I feel like my stomach is also in a relationship with you. She needs to be validated from time to time.” I laughed.

He cut his eyes at me, smiling. I sat and watched him make me breakfast in the middle of the afternoon. I couldn’t think of a sexier sight. He set the plate down in front of me, handing me a fork. Just as I went to take the fork, he pulled it back, looking me in the eyes. “Slowly. Okay? You haven’t eaten for a few days. You don’t want to make yourself si ck. Eat this and if you keep it down, I’ll make you more in a bit.”

I took the fork, nodding in agreement. I was starving at this point though, so eating slow was going to be hard. But if he was going to stand there and watch me the whole time, I would have to pace myself.

“Have you gotten any information from the guys that attacked us yet?” I asked, trying to deliberately chew as slowly as I could to keep from inhaling the food like I wanted to.

He nodded. He was leaning against the counter, with his arms crossed across his chest. Da mmit, he was handsome. I had to look down and cross my legs because my body was suddenly hungry for more than bacon and eggs.

“We found out where they got the drugs from, but they’re still not talking as to who put them up to coming after you and Misha. We’re close though. One of them is cracking faster than the other, on account of his entire face being broken. By a girl, no less.” He looked at me proudly.

I looked down at my food, slightly embarrassed. He chuckled. “Don’t be embarrassed, solnishko. You did good. They weren’t expecting you to fight back. We threatened to send you in the room with him. That’s what got him to start talking.” He rubbed his facial hair, laughing. “I never thought my girlfriend would be the threat to make someone crack under interrogation.”

“My street cred just went through the roof,” I said smiling at him, taking another bite of bacon.

After I was finished eating. I wanted a shower. I hadn’t showered since I came home from the hospital, and I felt st inky. Adrik offered to help me. After watching him cook for me, I wasn’t going to say no.

In the shower, I leaned back against him as he washed my hair for me. He was extra gentle and took his time massaging my scalp. My headache was gone, but my head was still tender where I had hit the sidewalk. His hands massaged my shoulders as I rested my head against his shoulder. His hands continued to roam farther down to my breasts. I could feel him grow hard. I leaned against him more, giving him more access to my breasts. I felt his lips on my neck, gently kissing, then biting the way he knew would drive me crazy. My breath caught and I moaned softly. I had missed his touch the last few days.

I turned to face him, my hands roaming over his chest. He pulled me closer, his lips finding mine. He kissed me passionately, but I could feel him holding back, like he was scared he was going to break me.

He broke the kiss and pulled me to his chest. “You’re supposed to be resting. The doctor said no excessive stimuli for two weeks. I think s ex is included in that list. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Why does that doctor h ate me?” I rested my head against his chest, still happy that I had his arms around me, at least.

He kissed the top of my head. “Two weeks is a long time,” he said, sighing.

I managed to stay awake after the shower and I kept my food down. It was a big day for me. Adrik cooked me a few more eggs after a short time. His phone buzzed on the counter as he was cooking. I grabbed it and looked at the caller ID.

“It’s Ivan. Can I answer it?” I asked.

“Of course, love.”

“Hello, you’ve reached the phone of the man who shall remain nameless. He can’t come to the phone right now. May I give him a message?”

Ivan chuckled. “Princess. It’s so good to hear your voice.”

“Aw, Ivan. I always knew you were squishy inside that tough exterior. You missed me. Don’t lie.”

“Da. Very much. Tell Boss that we have new information we need to discuss.”

Adrik motioned for them to come up. “Well, Ivan the Squishy, why don’t you come up and tell him?”

“Be right there,” he said, ending the call.

In what seemed like two minutes, all five guys were walking in the door. One by one, they all came and hugged me, telling me they had missed me.

“How are you feeling, gazelle?” Misha asked.

“Better. I ate earlier and managed to keep it down. I even took a shower. It’s been a big day for me,” I grinned at him.

“Now that you can eat, you’ll feel better much faster,” Stephen said.

Ivan came over and inspected the stitches above my eye. “Bruise looks better. Cut still looks ug ly.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me. I’m probably gonna have yet another scar to add to my extensive collection.”

Ivan surprised me by wrapping his arm around my shoulders. “Be proud of your scars. They’re a visual representation of how fu cking strong you are.” He leaned down and kissed the top of my head as Adrik set my next plate of food in front of me. He winked at me, as I was shocked at Ivan’s response.

Adrik looked at Ivan, “so, what news?”

“We showed the guy that attacked Misha what the guy that attacked Sephie looked like and then threatened to send her in with him. He sang like a fu cking canary,” Viktor said, trying to keep a straight face,

They all had to stifle their laughs, as I looked at them wide-eyed. “You guys aren’t serious. Like you’re just messing with me, right?”

Misha leaned on the counter, looking me in the eye. “He was terrified, gazelle.”

“Sh ut up.”

“Terrified,” Andrei said. “Almost pi ssed himself terrified.”

I felt my cheeks flush. Adrik, who was clearly enjoying this, asked, “what did you find out? Who put him up to it?”

Viktor sighed. “It was a bit of a test run. They’ve been quietly testing a new formulation of brawn around the city, seeing if they can amp up the violence. They feel like they got the right combination and gave it to these two mo rons with Misha and Sephie as the target to see how it would go. I’m sure they were being watched.”

“Who put them up to it?” Adrik asked, his jaw clenching. He crossed his arms across his chest. I could see his anger coming to the surface.

“Salvadori,” Ivan said. “We don’t know his exact plan but given that half the bosses are with you and half are with him, I’d say he’s trying to tip the scales in his favor. I think he’s planning on giving it to his soldiers. He wants a war in the city.”

I dropped my fork and they all looked at me. “Why would he want a war in the city? The people of the city love Adrik. They won’t stand for Salvadori trying to take over. Even if he beat you guys, which he won’t, the people won’t let him take over.”

Andrei sighed. “He’s probably not thinking about that. He just wants power and doesn’t care how he gets it. He’ll try to scare the city into bending to his will after he defeats us.”

“Innocent people are going to get hurt if he tries to start a war,” I said, finishing the last bite of eggs.

“We won’t let that happen,” Ivan said.

Chapter Sixty-Two

Sephie

The guys stayed in the penthouse for a few hours. I managed to stay awake the whole time. Big day, indeed. They discussed business, but then switched to what I'd missed while I'd been sleeping for days at a time.

Misha was teasing Andrei for being in the doghouse with Tori again. “What did you not do this time, Bubba?” I asked.

“She's mad at me. I was supposed to go to the house for a couple days, but I stayed here in case you woke up. We were all worried about you, Sephie,” he looked at me sheepishly.

I got up and moved beside him on the couch. I curled up next to him, hugging him. “You're the sweetest, Bubba. You also succeeded in making sure Tori will forever ha te me, but I can't be mad at you.” His giant arms hugged me tight.

“I've missed my spider monkey,” he said quietly. I laughed, hugging him tighter.

Everyone left as it got dark outside. Adrik cleaned up the few dishes in the kitchen, keeping a watchful eye on me. “Are you tired again, solnishko? You've been up for quite a while.”

“I'm a little tired, but I'm tired of sleeping. I haven't done anything but sleep for days.” I stretched my sore muscles.

“We can go lie down. You might fall asleep again. You need to rest. Doctor's orders. My orders too,” he said walking to me, his hands grabbing my hips and pulling me to him. I wanted to kiss him but didn't want to make our two-week prison sentence any worse than it already was. I closed my eyes so I wouldn't be tempted. “Are you okay? Is your headache back?” he asked, concern in his voice.

“No. No, I'm just trying to not look at you, so I won't want to fu ck you. It's not working. I still want to.” I said, smiling but keeping my eyes closed.

He cursed in Russian under his breath. “Two weeks. Just two weeks,” he muttered as he picked me up and carried me to the bedroom.

I kept my eyes closed, as it did make my head feel better. Movement was still sketchy for my brain to process. It also helped me ignore my growing desire to jump on top of him and r*p his clothes off. I felt the bed dip as he got into bed beside me. “Come here,” he said, pulling me toward him. I rolled over and felt his arms wrap around me as I rested my head on his na ked chest. His hand found its way under my shirt, lightly running up and down my back. I sighed, loving it anytime his hands were on me.

“Two weeks,” he muttered as he pulled me closer. I draped my leg over his, as [started to fall asleep yet again. I heard him curse softly. “Two weeks,” was the last thing I heard before falling asleep.

A week had passed since Misha and I were attacked. My head felt better, for the most part. I still had bruising of course and my stitches wouldn't come out for another week. I hadn't left the building since the attack, but I could at least go to the lower floors to visit Ms. Jackson and Mr. Turner, as well as hang out with the guys when Adrik was busy. I was starting to feel like the annoying little sister, as I followed them around, but was still unable to do anything.

We had the ball in two weeks. Apparently, it was a yearly occurrence in the city. The city's wealthiest people would get together for some kind of fundraising prospect. Adrik told me they changed the recipient every year. This year was a children's charity. This year was also when Adrik was being given an award from the people of the city, for his work in the city and his devotion to the people, so he had to be there. Which meant the guys also had to be there. Which meant I also had to be there.

I was not looking forward to having to wear a formal dress for an entire evening. And heels. I knew I was going to fall at some point. I'd already told all the guys they were going to have to take turns holding me off the floor so I wouldn't have to walk. They promised they would help me out. I also got a dress that was long enough that I could take my shoes off and no one would know. If this event took too long, I was depositing my shoes in the nearest plant and walking around barefoot.

The bright side of all of this was that my three day fast after the attack, as well as my appetite still not returning to normal, meant I had lost the five pounds I was hoping to lose before the event, which was helpful since I wasn't allowed to run or workout for another week. I was still basically useless. And bored. So bored.

I got a call from the shop where I got my dress. They wanted me to come in for a fitting before they sent the dress home with me. Because I was slightly tall for a girl, it meant I needed extra length, so they had to special order the dress for me. Andrei was free, so he was the lucky guy that got to take me. Viktor had been the one to go with me to pick the dress out, which was a hilarious sight. This giant Russian bear of a man looking at pretty dresses with his boss's girlfriend.

Viktor offered valuable insight, however. He could tell me what kind of dresses Adrik's past girlfriends had worn to such events. I was fairly certain that they showed way more skin than I was planning to, but I was also certain they did not have as many imperfections to hide as I did. I decided on a black halter neck gown that had a lace bodice and back, so it covered most of my back. My arms and shoulders were exposed. You could see the faintest bit of my scars, but they were mostly covered. It also had a very high slit in the skirt, so I wasn't being completely prudish.

When I came out of the dressing room to show Viktor, he was speechless and told me that Adrik would love it. “You must buy that one, sestrichka. You must. None of his girlfriends have ever worn anything like that. He will love it. You look beautiful.”

Chapter Sixty-Three

Sephie

On our way to the dress shop, I asked Andrei how things were going with Tori. He exhaled loudly. “Spider monkey, 1 don’t know what she wants. I don’t think she knows what she wants. I keep trying to make her happy, but it seems like I keep failing. Miserably.”

“Is she mad at you again?” He nodded his head. “What for this time? You haven’t even seen her in a couple of weeks?!”

“That’s why she’s mad.”

“Can’t she come to the city? She has a car, right? I mean, if we’re not at the house, what is she doing, exactly?

He took his eyes off the road to look at me. “That’s exactly what I said!”

“So…? Why won’t she come to the city? She can’t be mad at you for having to work when she’s perfectly capable of coming to see you. That’s a weird power move.”

“Thank you!”

“Have you specifically asked her? Like literally said, “Tori, I would like it if you came here since I can’t come back to the house right now’ or did you just vaguely hint at it without specifically asking her?”

He got quiet. “Net. I didn’t ask her like that.”

“Okay, try that. If that doesn’t work, then you need to move on from her. She’s proving to be very complicated. Is she good in bed at least? Wait, no. Forget I asked that question. I don’t need to know.” I sat in silence as he laughed. Then I added, “okay, forget I said forget I asked the question. I need to know. There has to be a reason you’re putting up with this.”

“Da.” His cheeks started to turn red, but he didn’t say anything more. I reached over and patted his shoulder as he drove.

“You go, Bubba.”

When I tried the dress on, it had been a little snug on me before. Now it was loose. The seamstress went to work, marking where it needed to be taken in. Great, now I’m going to be paranoid about eating too much until this stupid ball is over. She finished putting dozens of pens in the bodice of the dress and asked, “you want to show your boyfriend?”

I laughed. “He’s not my…oh never mind. Yes, I’ll show him.” She pulled the curtains back from the fitting room, revealing me to Andrei.

“Spider monkey…” he said, his mouth open. “You look like a girl!”

“I KNOW! It’s crazy right?”

He rubbed his face with both of his hands, like he was still astonished at the sight of me in a dress. I walked closer, turning so he could see the back. “I did good, huh? You can’t see anything,” I said, pointing to my back. He stood up to get a closer look.

“Only if you’re close and you’re looking for them. You can’t really see anything.” He looked me up and down one more time. “Boss is going to love this dress. It’s perfect for you.”

“You really think so?” I asked as I twirled in front of him.

He laughed as he grabbed my hand and twirled me again. “He’s going to spend the whole night dancing with you and nothing else.”

“Wait, what? There’s dancing involved?”

He laughed. “It’s a ball, spider monkey. What did you think there was going to be?”

“Not dancing. I did not bet on dancing.” I looked up at him, suddenly even more terrified of having to go to this thing. “Bubba! I don’t know how to dance!”

“Misha will teach you. It’s simple. He taught me,” he said as he placed a hand on my back, keeping my hand in his. He smiled down at me and lifted me slightly off the floor as he stepped around the small area in the dress shop. “See? You don’t even have to do anything,” he grinned at me.

“I can handle this. I can totally handle this. It’s your job to make sure that he does not break either of his arms before this event. I’m holding you personally responsible,” I said, trying to look at him as seriously as I could.

He spun me around one more time, then set me down and saluted me.

On the way back to the penthouse, Andrei’s phone buzzed in his pocket. He pulled it out and looked at it. I heard him curse under his breath. He threw it on the console and rubbed his face in his hand.

“Well, that doesn’t look good,” I said.

“Tori.”

“What now?”

“She’s asking if I’m coming to the house tonight for the weekend.”

“Soooo….why don’t you take this opportunity to ask her to come to the city instead? Make something up for why you can’t go back to the house. Blame it on me again. She can’t hate me more than she already does, but then ask her to come here.”

He hesitated. I picked his phone up and offered to do it for him. He just nodded his head.

I can’t come to the house this weekend. Boss needs me here. Any chance you can come here instead?

I set his phone down and waited. There was silence until we got all the way back to the penthouse. We were in the elevator when she finally texted him back. I wanted to grab the phone from him to see her response, but I refrained. His face told me it was a good answer, anyway. He grinned when he read her response and hugged me.

“Relationship coach spider’monkey, what would I do without you?”

“Not get laid. Clearly.”

The door dinged, signaling that we had arrived at the top floor. He bent down and spread his arms for me to jump on his back as the doors opened.

“Oh, hell yeah, I totally earned this one,” I said as I jumped on his back.

The two guards outside the penthouse both gave us funny looks as he walked us down the short hallway to the penthouse. He nodded toward me, “spider monkey,” was all he said to them, like it was a perfectly reasonable explanation.

Adrik was in the kitchen when Andrei walked in with me. “Where have you two been?” he asked, amused at me on Andrei’s back.

“I had to go to the dress shop to get my dress fitted. I made Bubba take me,” I said hopping down.

“Oh? All is well, then?” Adrik asked. He had tried to get me to tell him what the dress looked like, but I wouldn’t do it. He was mostly looking at Andrei when he asked the question.

Andrei answered him in Russian, so I couldn’t understand. I saw Adrik’s eyes going wide. I glared at Andrei, who put his hands up and took a step back. “I didn’t tell him what it looks like, spider monkey. I promise!” He was still walking slowly backward toward the door.

I felt Adrik’s arm around my waist and felt his breath on my neck. “He told me I wouldn’t be able to keep my hands off you the entire night once I saw you in that dress,” he said quietly against my neck.

I sent one more glare in Andrei’s direction. He grinned at me and quickly walked out the door. I turned toward Adrik, moving my hands to his neck, running them through his hair. “You promise he didn’t tell you what it looks like?”

He smiled down at me, kissing the tip of my nose. “I promise, solnishko. He kept me in the dark, as you wish.”

“Good.” I grinned at him. “I want it to be a surprise. I might as well have fun if I’m being forced to attend this thing anyway.”

“If Andrei is correct and I won’t be able to keep my hands off you, then we might not be staying the whole time anyway. It won’t be so bad,” he smiled as he kissed my lips. He pulled back and looked at the stitches over my eye, brushing my curls from my face. “I thought girls like to get dressed up and go out and show off and all that nonsense?”

“Other girls might like that. This girl thinks that’s a lot of effort for nonsense. But I will do it since you’re the favored son of the city. And somebody has to keep the rest of the women off you in public.”

“What other women?” he asked, smirking.

I grinned at him, kissing him. “Good answer.”

Chapter Sixty-Four

Sephie

I woke up that night with a terrible headache. I hadn't had any issues since the night of the attack, but now it felt like my head was being split open again. I got up, fumbling around in the dark, trying to make my way to the kitchen. I misjudged where the bedroom door was. I ran into a wall and cursed. Adrik must've heard it because he was up right away.

"Solnishko, what's wrong?" he asked, switching on the light.

I squinted at the light. "My head is pounding again. I was trying to make it to the kitchen."

He was next to me immediately. "What do you need? Water? You never took any of the pain pills they sent home. Do you want one of those?"

I nodded, closing my eyes harder, holding my head in my hands. It was starting to feel like my skull was being pried open from the inside. He gently walked me back to the bed. "You stay. I'll get it for you."

I laid down and within a minute, he was back with a glass of water and a pill. He set the water on the table and turned the light out. I heard him pick up the remote for the blinds. I knew he was closing them so it would be as dark as possible in the room. I felt the bed dip as he got back in bed. He pulled me onto his chest, his hands running lightly through my hair.

Either this pill was stronger than what they gave me at the hospital, or I wasn't in as much pain as I was the day of the attack, because it knocked me out in a matter of minutes.

I woke up sometime later, not knowing what time it was, or what day it was. I was fully expecting to have slept for multiple days once again, as I felt super groggy. I felt around on the bed for Adrik, but he was gone. The room was dark, so I felt my way toward the bathroom to turn on a light. I closed my eyes before switching the light on. I'd learned it was easier to not completely shock my eyes.

I felt nauseous again, which is why I hadn't wanted to take any of those pills to begin with. Looks like food is off the table for today. As I opened my eyes, it wasn't as bright as I was expecting. I left the light on and found a pair of leggings to put on. I left the bedroom to find Adrik.

He was again at the kitchen counter, looking over files. He saw me come into the kitchen. He stood up and walked to me. "How are you feeling?" His face had a worried look on it.

"Better now. Please tell me I didn't sleep for a day and a half this time."

He smiled. "No, just twelve hours this time. It's only Saturday afternoon."

"Well, that's progress, I guess."

"Are you hungry?"

"Noooooo. No food. Food is a bad idea right now."

He clicked his tongue. "I don't like that you don't eat. You're too skinny."

"Trust me, I don't like it either. I'd like nothing more than to eat a giant sandwich right now," I said. My stomach churned, making me feel like I was going to vomit. I put my hand over my mouth until the feeling passed. "Bad idea. No food talk."

He looked at me, still somewhat concerned, "I think you should take it easy the next few days. Maybe you overdid it with your trip to the dress shop? Is that the only place you went yesterday?"

"Yep. We weren't even gone that long."

"You still have another week of bed rest. Maybe you shouldn't leave. Maybe it's too much?"

I sighed. "Boring. But if it keeps me from having another headache like that one, I'll do it."

He wrapped his arms around me, pulling me to his chest. "I'm sorry you must deal with this, solnishko. All of this." He sighed as he held me close.

"None of this is your fault. You have nothing to be sorry for. You've done nothing but keep me safe and take care of me," I said, hugging him closer and inhaling his intoxicating scent. We stood in silence for a moment, until the buzzing of his phone interrupted the silence. He grabbed my hand and pulled me to the kitchen with him.

He glanced at his phone, looking to me. "Ivan. Would you like to answer?"

I shook my head, placing my hand on my stomach again. I still felt like I was going to puke. He raised his eyebrow, clicking his tongue. As he talked to Ivan, I sat the on the kitchen counter, hoping my queasy stomach would settle down. He set his phone down and stepped between my legs. His hand cupped my face, concern all over his face. "I don't like this, solnishko. Do you need to see the doctor again? I can call my personal doctor to come here, so you won't have to leave."

I closed my eyes and leaned into his touch. "No, I don't think there's anything they can do for me. I don't think there's much a person can do for a concussion, other than wait it out. I think this is from the stupid pain pill. I don't want to take another one of those."

Before he could respond, I heard the guys walking into the penthouse. Ivan walked in the kitchen, looking somewhat concerned. "Princess, you look terrible."

"I feel terrible, Grumplestiltskin," I said with my eyes still closed, still enjoying Adrik's warm touch against my face.

Viktor had walked in behind Ivan. He stood against the opposite counter, his arms folded across his broad chest. "You hit your head harder than you thought. You have another headache?"

"Not right now. I did last night. I took a pain pill to make it go away and I think that's why I feel like shit now."

Ivan clicked his tongue. I opened my eyes to see him nod his head to Adrik, who stepped to the side. Ivan stood in front of me and took my hand in his. He motioned for Adrik to look, then he squeezed a spot in between my thumb and forefinger. Initially it hurt, but the longer he squeezed, the better my head felt. I looked at him, my eyes wide. He smirked at me, then moved to a spot just below my wrist, showing Adrik the new spot. This one took a little longer, but as he held the pressure there, my stomach started to feel better and the nausea slowly passed. I looked up at him, my mouth hanging open in shock. "How did you do that?"

He smiled at me. Winking, he said, "you're not the only one that hates doctors and taking pills."

I wrapped my arms around his neck. "Don't tell Andrei, but you're my favorite now." I kissed his cheek. "Thank you."

He looked at Adrik and said, "I can show you more spots to help her. Some on her foot too. Acupuncture will help her get relief."

"Whatever she needs. I can have someone come here for acupuncture every day if she needs it. Whatever makes her feel better and not have to sleep for days at a time. It's getting boring without her," he said, winking at me.

Viktor laughed from across the kitchen. "We all tried to hang out with Tori, since she's here this weekend. It's not the same. Not the same at all."

I put my hands over my mouth. "Oh no! Is Bubba okay? Is he in trouble now? Do we need to save him?"

Viktor chuckled. "When is he not in trouble?"

"Harsh. But fair. She is wound much tighter than I thought she was going to be. I'm somewhat regretting facilitating that arrangement," I said. Ivan had taken my other arm and was pressing on the acupuncture points on that arm to help give me more relief as we talked. Adrik watched him closely, like he was taking mental notes. I thought for moment, then added, "it is a unique situation that you guys are in, though. It's a lot for someone to walk into."

Ivan looked down at me, changing the pressure point to the one below my wrist. "You did just fine."

I smiled up at him. "Because I embrace the chaos."

He laughed. He let go of my arm. "Better?" he asked as he stepped away.

1 patted my stomach. "So much better. I feel like I can eat soon. Maybe."

Adrik returned to stand beside me, his arm around my waist. He kissed my cheek. "I'm so happy you feel better, solnishko." He looked genuinely relieved. I leaned into him, resting my head on his shoulder. "I will get you acupuncture. Whatever helps your appetite. You're too bony now," he said poking my hip bone. "You're going to start bruising me. I'm very delicate." He smiled down at me, kissing me quickly.

"You're the reason I have to wear a dress in public, so you did this to yourself."

Ivan said, "hey hey hey, no fighting you two. You sound like Andrei and Tori. We need one couple that's happy."

I laughed, pulling Adrik in front of me. I turned him to face Viktor and Ivan so he could still talk to them and hung my arms over his shoulders, resting my chin on his shoulder. He grabbed both my hands and held them in his. "Have you met me, Ivan? Don't you know by now that I'm rarely serious?"

Chapter Sixty-Five

Adrik

Sephie managed to eat a little bit, after Ivan showed me the pressure points to help give her relief. I was hopeful that she would be able to get some sleep without having to take another pill. I've been worried about her since the attack. She's so strong, but she hasn't been completely herself yet. I hated seeing her in pain in any way. Of course, she was still fun to be around and always looking after everyone else, but we could all tell that she was having to make an effort to be that way. Normally, it came so naturally. Now, she was having to force it.

At least now I had a way to get her some relief. I felt like I could do something finally. I've felt mostly useless throughout this whole situation, which drives me crazy. It only adds to my frustration with everything that's going on with Salvadori and Anthony. Salvadori had tried his best to get the other bosses to turn against me. There were six bosses under me. Salvadori managed to take two to his side, but the other three came to me immediately when Salvadori approached them. This showed me they were loyal to me.

I was working on ways to get more information from Sicily on Anthony and Lorenzo. One of the bosses that was loyal to me, Armando, had extensive family in Italy. His family was powerful in Italy, as well as in the city. He was helping to set up an information network from Sicily. We had gotten bits and pieces of information so far. Nothing substantial, but information takes time to collect.

It looked like Salvadori wanted to start a war in the city. I was trying to avoid that, at all costs. The people of the city didn't need to be involved in this petty dispute. I would take the fight to Sicily and strike first before I would let Salvadori unleash chaos on the city like he was planning.

I looked down at Sephie, sleeping soundly on my chest. I ran my hand through her hair lightly. She loved it anytime my hands were in her hair, even in her sleep. It would make her snuggle into me, sometimes making the cutest little cooing noises as she slept. It was one of my favorite things to do when she was sleeping. It made me smile every time.

She wrapped her body around mine tighter as my hand ran through her curls. I groaned quietly. I wanted her so badly, right now. She still had another week to go for her bed rest. I didn't want to mess that up, so I was trying my best to refrain. With each day, it got more and more difficult to keep my hands off her. Especially on days when she was feeling well and showed glimpses of being her old self. Her sense of humor, the brightness she would bring to everything she did, was sexy as he ll. At this point, she could smile at me, and I'd be ready to rip her clothes off.

Her fingers lightly started to move on my chest. She was still sound asleep. This was something she would do occasionally. I'd decided she was playing the piano in her sleep. Her fingers always moved rhythmically when she would do it and she was always sleeping peacefully when it happened. I ran my hand down to her waist, holding her close. I drifted off to sleep as she played lightly on my chest.

The next morning, I woke up to Sephie's hands running lightly over my back. Her body was pressed against mine, her arms wrapped around me. When she noticed me stirring, she reached up and kissed my lips lightly. "Good morning," she said as I opened my eyes. Her sweet smile the first thing I saw.

"Mmm. Good morning, my love. How do you feel this morning?"

"Better. Ivan is magic, apparently." I heard her stomach growl as she talked. "My stomach agrees," she said, as she smiled bigger.

"This is very good news. I will have someone come today for acupuncture. You'll feel normal again in no time." |

pushed her onto her back, folling half on top of her. "Which means I can wake you up the way I really want to once again," I said kissing her deeply.

She moaned into my mo uth, making me want her that much more. I kissed her neck, biting softly. I heard her gasp. "Fu ck this week can't go by fast enough," she groaned.

I laughed as I kissed her chest. "You and me both, solnishko. You and me both. I want nothing more than to be deep inside you right now."

Her breath caught. "You are not making this any easier."

"I'm sorry…that's a lie. I'm not sorry," I said, grinning at her.

She pushed me off her, getting out of bed. "I don't want another headache. You stay away from me!" she said, laughing.

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry. For real. I'll behave. I promise."

Ivan knew of an acupuncturist, and she was able to come to the penthouse that afternoon. I gave them privacy in one of the spare rooms, but I was close by. I heard a few painful cries from Sephie and wanted to go in the room, but Ivan stopped me. "She's okay. The pain is short-lived."

I refrained from barging into the room. Sephie was quiet the rest of the time. Well over an hour later, the acupuncturist came out of the room, closing the door behind her. "She will be out in a minute. She's a strong woman. Her body has been through a lot, but she's healing." She looked at me. "You're her boyfriend?" I nodded. "You're helping her more than you know. Her qi would spike when she talked of you. You make her even stronger than she already is."

I ran my hand through my hair, not knowing what to say. I looked to Ivan and back to the acupuncturist. "What do I do? How do I help her more?"

She smiled. "Keep loving her." She grabbed my hand and pressed on roughly the same spot as Ivan had used on Sephie yesterday. She closed her eyes while she pressed, then said, "she's doing the same for you. You two make each other stronger. You each have what the other needs. You are the yin; she is the yang. Together you find balance." She let go of my hand, still smiling at me.

I stood, speechless. Ivan looked at her, "how often does she need acupuncture to help with her concussion? The pain pills they gave her at the hospital make her sleep for days and make her nauseous so that she can't eat. We don't want her to take them, but she had a crushing headache the other day after going out," he said.

"She's got blockages, some from the attack, some from her past. I can come everyday for this week, but as she clears, she won't need it as often. She'll start to feel better right away, and she should have an appetite again."

I extended my hand to her. "Thank you for making her feel better. Whatever she needs she will have."

The door to the spare room opened and Sephie walked out, looking more relaxed and yet more alert than I'd seen her since the attack. Her light was coming back. She walked to me, tucking herself in my side where she fit perfectly. Ivan looked at me, he had clearly noticed it too. He walked the acupuncturist out, after Sephie had thariked her once again.

I looked down at Sephie. "How was it?"

"Painful at first. But then it was so much better. I don't know, I feel lighter if that makes sense?"

I smiled at her. "I can see it. You look more like your old self. It makes me happy. She will come tomorrow again." I kissed the top of her head. "She says you're very strong." She hid her face in my shoulder. "You're cute when you're shy, my love."

Chapter Sixty-Six

Adrik

We spent the evening together with the guys and Tori before she went back to the house. She cooked for the house staff when we weren't there, so she was still needed during the week while they were there. Sephie's appetite was better than it had been in days, making me happy. Misha was also very relieved to see her eating again. He's been beating himself up since the attack, thinking about all the alternative things he could've done. It's taken a toll on him. He hasn't been sleeping well.

Of course, Sephie noticed that he was more stressed than usual. She found the perfect moment to go to him when everyone else was busy talking amongst themselves so they could have a semi-private moment. I saw her talk to him, somewhat sternly it looked like, and then he just crumbled. She stood on her toes and wrapped her arms around his neck. He held onto her like he was drowning and she was his lifeline.

They both wiped their eyes as they smiled at each other. As always, she knew exactly what Misha needed to help him feel better. She was the only one that could've said the words he needed to hear and have him actually hear them. We had all been telling him the exact same thing she likely just said to him, but he wouldn't listen to any of us. She was the only one that could've saved him from his own mind.

She walked back to me, that smile that could stop my heart across her beautiful face. I pulled her to me. Leaning down to her ear, I whispered, "I'm in love with you. Completely in love with you."

She leaned back, looking at me with wide eyes, her mouth slightly open. I smiled at her, kissing her gently. "You have my heart, Persephone. It's yours."

"Adrik…I…" she stammered.

I smiled down at her. "You don't have…" She didn't let me finish my sentence. Her lips were on mine, her passion for me the only thing I could feel. I knew she felt the same for me. She didn't need to tell me. I know I surprised her with my declaration, but after what the acupuncturist said earlier today, watching Sephie's light return, and watching her with Misha, I needed to tell her. I've loved her since that first night I saw her in the restaurant. I've never been more sure about anything in my life.

She broke the kiss, pressing her forehead to mine, breathing heavily. "Adrik…"

I loved hearing her say my name. For someone who rarely used it, I loved hearing it roll off her tongue. My name was one thing that not many people knew. Even Tori didn't know my name and she'd worked for me for a few years now. I preferred to remain anonymous. It allowed me more freedom. But thinking back to that first night in the parking lot of the restaurant, talking to Sephie, I didn't hesitate to tell her my name.

She was the only one I wanted. For as long as she would have me.

Sephie

The second week of my bed rest went much better than the first. With the daily acupuncture, I felt so much better. I felt stronger, more like myself. My appetite had returned, even though I was still slightly paranoid about eating too much. I still had a week to go before the ball and fitting into that dress.

Adrik was on the phone with Armando. He was pacing back and forth in the kitchen as he talked to Armando. Not because he was angry, it was just his habit to walk back and forth on long calls. I watched him from the couch, where I was waiting for the acupuncturist to show up for my session of the day.

I smiled, thinking about the events of last weekend. We had spent Sunday night together with all the guys and Tori. It was a nice time, but I noticed that Misha was struggling. Adrik hadn't told me that Misha had been beating himself up mentally about what happened. I managed to catch Misha slightly away from everyone else so we could have a private conversation.

"Misha, you look like bloody hell. You're beating yourself up over what happened, aren't you?" He just nodded, without saying a word. "Misha, look at me. Listen to me. Stop it. Stop it right now. Nothing about what happened was your fault. Stop replaying it in your mind. Stop keeping yourself in a mental prison because you feel responsible. You did everything right. I'm grateful you were there. I'm grateful you were at the hospital with me. I'm grateful for you, Misha." I saw him struggling to keep it together, so I reached up and hugged his neck. He latched onto me tightly. Poor guy. I didn't know he'd been struggling all week while I was mostly sleeping. I should've had this conversation with him sooner. "You're my favorite. Don't tell the others."

He laughed and stepped back slightly. He wiped his eyes as he stood up, which made me have to wipe my own. "Thank you, gazelle."

"Anytime, kiddo."

I walked back to Adrik, who was looking at me with even more adoration than usual. He pulled me to him, whispering in my ear, "I'm in love with you. Completely in love with you." I was shocked that he said it. I knew he loved me, just as I knew that I loved him, but he hasn't said the words yet. Nor had I.

I laughed at myself for not knowing what to say to him. It didn't even bother him that I hadn't said it in return. I just kissed him with as much passion as I could transmit in one kiss. I think he knew that I loved him, but I needed to tell him. I was just waiting for the right moment to tell him and as always, he was giving me the space to be unapologetically me.

That was one thing I adored about him. He was so confident in my love for him. He had five chiseled, handsome men working as his bodyguards that he would leave alone with me regularly and he never once acted jealous. I was allowed to goof around with the guys as much as I wanted and he would just laugh at my antics. I never looked at any of them the same way I looked at Adrik, but not every man would've been okay with my goofiness around the guys. He accepted me for me, and I loved that about him.

He had ended his call and caught me staring at him, completely lost in thought. He walked to me, leaning down to kiss me.

"What are you thinking about, solnishko?"

I sighed, smiling up at him. "How much I love you."

His breath caught. He stared at me intensely for a moment, then pulled me off the couch to stand in front of him. His hands pulled me close, his blue eyes never leaving mine. "Solnishko, you've made me the happiest man."

"I can say the same. You make me the happiest woman," I said, standing on my toes to kiss him. He kissed me passionately, lifting me off the ground without breaking the kiss. As he spun me around, I smiled against his lips, laughing.

I heard Ivan come in with the acupuncturist. Adrik set me down, still holding onto me. The acupuncturist smiled broadly when she saw us together. "You're feeling better, Miss Sephie."

I nodded. "Much better, thanks to you."

She nodded toward Adrik and said, "not only thanks to me."

I looked up at him and grinned, knowing she was right. I kissed him again, quickly, before walking to the spare room with the acupuncturist.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 67

Chapter Sixty-Seven

Sephie

Once the session was done, I asked her, “um, do you think it’ll be okay for me to start doing more stuff? Like can I leave the building now?”

She nodded as she was packing up her things. “You’re much clearer now. You feel stronger, no?”

“I do. I’m just paranoid about the headache coming back. I also, uh, want to do more physical activities.” I was thinking about Adrik when I said that but trying so hard to make it sound like I wanted to workout again.

She gave me a knowing look. “Your boyfriend.” My cheeks flushed and I nodded. “He will help you heal, Sephie. You two find balance within each other. You need him as much as he needs you. You’re good for each other.”

I smiled and hugged her. I couldn’t help it. This was the best news I’d gotten in two weeks. She laughed and continued to pack up her things. “If your headache comes back, you call me. Your boyfriend is paying me extremely well to come here. Even if it comes in the middle of the night, I’ll be here to take care of it.” She looked at me seriously, handing me her card.

“Thank you,” I said.

We walked out of the spare room, finding Ivan and Adrik in the kitchen talking. Ivan stepped toward us so he could walk the acupuncturist out. Adrik thanked her, then looked to me, smiling but slightly perplexed. I couldn’t stop smiling.

He raised his eyebrow, looking at me. I walked to him, “is Ivan coming back?”

He shook his head no. “He’s taking care of a few things for me this afternoon.” He still had a look of slight confusion on his face.

“Good,” I said, standing on my toes to kiss him. I kissed him gently at first, having fun keeping him confused. It didn’t take very long and I couldn’t help myself. I deepened the kiss. I tugged at his shirt, untucking it. My fingers fumbling quickly to unbutton it. He pulled it over his head, his lips only briefly leaving mine. He picked me up and set me down on the counter. I could feel the fire in his kiss, like he was incapable of holding back anymore.

He ripped my shirt off quickly, his hands roaming over my bare skin, giving me goosebumps everywhere he touched. He pushed me back, grabbing the waistband of my pants. He lifted my hips and pulled them off. His blue eyes darker, as he looked at me with intense desire. I chewed my bottom lip, looking at him standing in front of me shirtless. He stopped and looked at my bottom lip, gently swiping his thumb over it. He leaned down and su cked my bottom lip in between his lips, biting it gently. I moaned in his mo uth, grabbing onto his neck and pushing my hips toward him.

He reached behind my back, unhooking my bra, throwing it on the floor. His hands ran down to my hips. He hooked his thumbs in my panties, ripping them off me. I threw my head back laughing. “I’ll buy you new ones, solnishko,” he said as he kissed my neck. He bit my neck harder than normal, causing me to inhale sharply. My hands found his belt, undoing it with lightning speed. I unbuttoned his pants, pulling on them to unzip him like he always did to mine. His arms wrapped around me, pulling me close. I wrapped my legs around him, as he groaned against my neck.

He stopped long enough to rid himself of his pants. He pulled me to the edge of the counter, wrapping my legs around him again. He pulled me close, kissing me deeply as he entered me. I gasped, not realizing how much I had missed this feeling. He stopped for a few seconds once he was all the way in, letting me adjust. His blue eyes dark with lust, he whispered in my ear, “I don’t think I can hold back for very long, love. I don’t want to hurt you.”

I pushed my hips into him slowly, holding onto him. “Then don’t try,” I said, nipping at his ear. He groaned against my neck, slamming into me. I threw my head back, reveling in the feeling of fullness that came with his intensity. I wrapped my legs around him tighter as he grabbed onto my a ss and started thrusting into me hard and fast. I braced myself with one arm to meet his thrusts, knowing I wasn’t going to last long either. I was already close to the edge. I could feel my body building to explosion, tingles exploding over my entire body. My body exploded into an orgasm. He managed to keep his rhythm until I started to come down and then he exploded in his own orgasm. He stilled, still holding me close, both of us breathing heavily against the other.

“I missed you, solnishko,” he said kissing my neck gently.

“I missed you, my love,” I said quietly in his ear. He leaned back so he could look me in my eyes, a small smile on his lips. He kissed my lips, su cking my bottom lip in between his teeth again.

*I love you, Persephone,” he said, his blue eyes staring intently into mine. I looked into his eyes, feeling like I could get lost. “I love you, Adrik,” I said, never taking my eyes off his.

The next few days were a blur. Adrik and I would take every opportunity to sneak off by ourselves like we were teenagers. We couldn’t get enough of each other. It had always been that way, but it felt like it was at a new level now. The more time we spent together, the better I felt.

We were lying in bed, both sweaty and exhausted, he pulled me to him. “You’re sure this isn’t too much for you? I don’t want to hurt you or have your headache come back.”

I rested my chin on his chest so I could look at him, my fingers running lightly over his chest. “I feel better, I promise. It’s not too much. My headache hasn’t come back and we’ve been screwing like rabbits the last couple of days. If it was going to come back, I would think it would’ve done so by now.”

He smiled, but still had an air of concern on his face. “Maybe we should get you acupuncture again, just to be safe. Before the ball in two days. Your light shines brighter when you have it done,” he said as he lightly ran a finger over the features of my face. “You look even more beautiful.”

I closed my eyes, enjoying his touch. “I won’t argue. It does make me feel better. But I also feel fine without it, too. And if it makes me prettier, then maybe that will help keep the other women off you at the ball,” I said ginning at him.

“It will mean the guys will be busy keeping the other men away from you.”

“What other men?”

He laughed. “Good answer.

Chapter Sixty-Eight

Sephie

I had gone with Ivan the day before the ball to pick up my dress. I needed to try it on one more time, just to make sure all the alterations were good. Ivan was even more comical in the dress shop than Viktor was. Ivan was so serious all the time, he looked like he was mad at all the dresses. I asked him if he wanted to see the dress before we got there. He said he did, so I swore him to secrecy.

“You can see it, but Adrik doesn’t know what it looks like, so you’re not allowed to tell him. I want it to be a surprise. I’ll hurt you if you tell him,” I said, as threatening as I could.

“I saw what you can do. I won’t say a word to him,” he said, his hands up in surrender, a small smile on his face.

When I came out of the fitting room, he was speechless. He just stood and looked at me for a moment. “Princess…”

“You think he’ll like it?” I asked, showing him the 360 view.

“He will love it. You look like a princess.”

I laughed. “Do princesses wear black?”

“Maybe not. But Queens of the Underworld do.”

I raised an eyebrow at him, then smiled widely at him.

We dropped the dress off at Ms. Jackson’s apartment. She was going to help me get ready, as I really had no girlfriends and I had no clue about makeup or how to put my hair up into anything other than a bun, a braid, or a ponytail. Ms. Jackson said she knew exactly what to do, which was 100% more than I knew, so I trusted her.

When we walked into her apartment, Ivan surprised us both by asking her, “when’s your next Bingo night, Ms. Jackson?”

She laughed. “Are you offering to be my date?”

“Yes, ma’am. Anytime you want one, you have a standing date.”

I hung my dress up on the door frame of her spare room, my mouth open in shock.

She cut her eyes to me and just smiled. She walked to him and put her arm through his. “You guys get through the ball and we’ll talk,” she winked at him.

As we were leaving her apartment, Mr. Turner was walking down the hall toward his door.

“Miss Sephie, Mr. Ivan, how are you both today?”

“Great, Mr. Turner, how are you? How was work?”

“Oh, it was fine. Fine. They’re getting ready for tomorrow night. You’re all going to be there, right? It is a special night for your boss, after all.”

“Yes, Mr. Turner. We’ll all be there,” Ivan said.

“Good, good. You know there’s supposed to be a lot of people attending. I feel better knowing you’ll all be there,” he said as he looked from Ivan to me and back to Ivan. Ivan nodded his head and put his arm around my shoulders.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Turner. She’s going to be safe. We can’t live without her anyway. We’ve got everything covered,” he said, a small smile on his lips.

“That’s what I like to hear, young man,” Mr. Turner said as he tipped his hat to us, continuing to his apartment.

Ivan left his arm around my shoulders and walked us to the elevator. I wrapped my arm around his waist when we stepped into the elevator. “Ivan the Squishy,” I said, leaning my head against his shoulder.

I had more acupuncture the morning of the ball, per Adrik’s request. He said he wanted to make sure I would be okay and able to handle the evening’s event. Since it made me feel so much better, I wasn’t going to argue with him. I skipped breakfast and only ate a few bites here and there at lunch. I was paranoid about fitting into the dress, since it had been taken in.

I went to Ms. Jackson’s apartment in the afternoon. Misha escorted me down. Once I was in the apartment, he left me with Ms. Jackson. He said one of them would be back to get me, but they needed to get ready to go as well. I had to admit, I was looking forward to seeing them all in tuxedos.

Ms. Jackson went to work on my hair. She had looked at my dress and said I needed to wear my hair up. I did not argue with her. It took her a while to get my mass of hair contained. She was much more skilled than I was and once she was done, she had braided a few small strands at the front of my head and worked those into an intricate updo in the back. She left a few stray curls around my face, as she said it was somewhat my signature and I didn’t look right without them.

Once my hair was done, she got to work on my makeup. She knew I hated wearing makeup, so she kept it very light. She made me look like a classic movie star. “Makeup is meant to accentuate what you’ve got, not make you look like a completely different person,” she said as she worked on my face like she was a makeup artist in a former life.

“How did you learn how to do all this?” I asked, my eyes closed as she applied God knows what to my eyelids.

“When I was a spy, my cover was as an American movie star. I had to be glamorous all the time, so I learned to do my own hair and makeup to play the part. Once you learn a few tricks, it becomes quite easy.”

“Ms. Jackson, you’ve lived such an interesting life. How did I never know this about you?”

“Well, child, I don’t really broadcast that I used to be a spy to many people. There are probably still Russians out there that are still looking for me. I barely made it out of there alive, but that’s a story for another time.”

“I would love to hear it. When you get back from Bingo,” I said smiling at her. “Have you decided which one you’re taking to Bingo first? Are you going big and walking in with like three of them at once, like you’re the boss, applesauce?”

She put her hand over her mouth as she laughed at the thought. Her cheeks flushed. “I hadn’t thought about that option, but now that you mention it, I might as well go big or go home.”

“Be fierce, Ms. Jackson. You own that fu cking Bingo Hall.”

She continued laughing as she finished my makeup. She took a step back, to admire her work. “Okay, child. Take a look and tell me what you think,” she said holding up a mirror.

I checked myself out in the mirror. “Ms. Jackson! You’re a miracle worker! I look like a girl! Like a real girl!” I was grinning from ear to ear as I looked at my reflection. It still looked like me, just enhanced. “It’s so perfect!”

She smiled at me, crossing her arms across her chest. “Let’s get you in your dress so I can see the whole picture.”

She helped me into the dress. I was so nervous she wasn’t going to be able to zip it up, but it fit perfectly. I exhaled, relieved that no additional help was needed to get me into the dress. She handed me my shoes and stepped back to take in the full picture.

As I slipped into my shoes, I turned to look at her. She was leaning against the chair I had been sitting in. I could see the tears welling up in her eyes as she looked at me, almost like a mother would look at a daughter.

*Persephone, I am so proud of you. You are one he ll of a woman and you’re living up to your namesake.”

I felt the tears collecting in my eyes. “Oh, Ms. Jackson. I’m going to ruin all your hard work.” I quickly dabbed the tears from my eyes so it wouldn’t mess anything up. I walked to her, bending down, and hugging her tightly. “Thank you. For everything. I love you, Ms. Jackson.”

“Oh, child. You deserve it all. And more.”

We heard a knock at her door. I stood up, still dabbing my eyes. “That’ll be one of the guys to take me upstairs.”

She took both of my hands in hers and looked me in the eyes. “I know you’re going to be nervous tonight; anybody would be. But I want you to remember who you’re named for and walk in like you own the da mn place. Queens don’t bow to anyone but their King. Remember that.”

Chapter Sixty-Nine

Sephie

I smiled at her as we heard another knock on her door, a little louder this time. She walked toward the door and opened it. All five guys were in the hall outside Ms. Jackson’s apartment to escort me upstairs. They all looked incredibly handsome in their tuxedos. My mo uth fell open, looking at each of them.

Ivan spoke first. “We couldn’t decide who would come get you, so we all came to get you.”

I walked toward them all, as they all stared at me like it was their first time seeing a girl. “I know, I know. Ms. Jackson works miracles, right?” I said, laughing.

“Ms. Jackson only helped bring out what was already there,” Viktor said, winking at me. I felt my cheeks flush. He offered me his arm. I slid my arm through his, thanking Ms. Jackson one more time before I left her apartment.

“You boys can show up looking like this anytime you please,” she said as she watched us walk down the hall toward the elevator.

When the doors opened to the penthouse, the two guards standing outside who usually didn’t pay me much attention, both stared at me as I walked by. Must be something to this whole looking like a girl thing…

Before we walked into the penthouse, I suddenly got nervous. I stopped Ivan from opening the door. I looked at all of them, shaking my hands in front of me. “Fu ck, I’m so nervous. Do you guys really think he’s going to like this?”

“Are you serious right now, spider monkey?” Andrei asked.

I nodded my head, still nervously shaking my hands in front of me. I chewed on my bottom lip. S hit. I have lipstick on. I shouldn’t do that. Oh jeez, I already messed up my makeup.

Misha stepped in front of me, both hands on my shoulders. “Gazelle, look at me. We’ve seen every one of Boss’s girlfriends. Not a single one of them can hold a candle to you. Trust us. He will LOVE it.”

I exhaled and closed my eyes. Ivan opened the door and stepped aside for me to walk through. “We’ll be waiting out here when you’re ready to go, princess.” He winked at me as I walked past.

I walked through the door, hearing Ivan close it behind me. My shoes clicked on the hard floors, announcing my arrival. Adrik was standing at the windows, looking out over the city as the sun began to set. He had laid his tux jacket over the back of one of the couches. While all the guys had a regular wh ite shirt with their tuxedo, his was black. I loved him in all black. There was something so sexy, so dangerous about him in all black.

He turned slowly to look at me, his hands in his pockets. As he turned toward me, I could see he had left the tie off and chose to leave his top two buttons undone. His hair was neatly in place, his day-old stubble giving his se x appeal an extra edge. I caught my breath as I took in his full picture.

As he caught sight of me, that sexy smirk appeared on his face. He slowly looked me up and down a few times. I had stopped walking, so he hadn’t seen the slit in the skirt yet. “Come here,” he said, extending his hand to me. As I took a step, revealing almost my entire leg, his eyes widened. He cursed under his breath, inhaling sharply. I took his hand and he twirled me around, so he could see the back.

hapter Sixty-Nine

“Sephie. I have no words. Beautiful doesn’t begin to describe it. You’re breathtaking.”

I turned to face him, still nervous. “You really like it?”

“I love it. You’ve exceeded all my expectations. The guys were right. I won’t be able to keep my hands off you.” He pulled me closer, kissing my lips gently. “They’re going to be busy tonight keeping the other men off you.”

1 felt my cheeks flush, looking down. “At least there’s five of them. There’s only one of me. You’re going to have to let me have at least three of them to run interference with the women that are going to be vying for your attention.”

“They can try to get my attention, but none of them are my solnishko. I won’t be able to take my eyes off you.” He wrapped his hands around my waist, pulling me close. He put his face close to mine, lightly brushing mine with his facial hair. I giggled as he whispered, “you are living up to your namesake, my queen.”

I pulled him to me, holding him close to me. As soon as I felt his hands on me, I calmed down. I was going to need his touch tonight to help me keep my cool.

He kissed my cheek. “Come, we should go.” He walked to the couch, slipping his jacket on. He offered his arm. I slipped my arm through his. He stared at me for a moment, his blue eyes dark, before heading toward the door.

As he opened the door, we were met by all five guys, patiently waiting for us. They all had smirks on their faces as they Jooked at me. I smiled at them, knowing they all wanted to tell me “told you so” but they were trying to be nice to me.

“You guys were right.”

“I’m sorry, can we get that on a recording, princess?” Ivan said, smiling at me.

“Don’t push your luck.” I said, winking at him.

There was a red carpet set up to the side of the entrance of the hotel. I saw it as we dr ove past; my eyes went wide. Adrik smiled down at me, pulling me closer to him. “We’re skipping that. I don’t do press pictures.”

“This. This is why I love you.”

He chuckled, kissing my cheek. “I’m so glad you’re back. I missed the normal you.”

The SUVs pulled up to the sidewalk, away from the press and the red carpet. Adrik stepped out, extending his hand to me. I slid over to get out, trying not to flash everyone as I stepped out. Andrei, Viktor, and Misha stepped out with us. Ivan and Stephen would park the vehicles and meet us inside.

I looked at the three of them. “You boys clean up well. Eye candy, indeed,” I said smiling at them.

Viktor and Andrei led the way, with Misha behind us. We were far enough away that no one really noticed us walking toward the entrance. Mr. Turner was there at the door. His smile stretched across his face when he saw us approaching. He took his hat off, bowing to me. “Miss Sephie, you look absolutely stunning tonight, young lady.”

I walked to him, reaching up to kiss his cheek. “You’re too kind, Mr. Turner.”

“I only speak the truth, my dear,” he said as he opened the door for us to enter the hotel.

The main floor of the hotel had several ballrooms of varying sizes and grandness for such occasions. We would be going to the largest one, as this was one of the biggest events the hotel held each year.

As we entered the ballroom, there were people everywhere. Adrik pulled me a little closer, whispering in my ear, “you stay with me or within sight of one of the guys tonight, okay?” I nodded my head. That would not be a problem. No way was I going to be left on my own with this many people around.

We were met with waiters carrying glasses of champagne. Adrik waved them away each time. His aversion to alcohol was one of the many things I loved about him. There was a live orchestra playing, with a large dance floor in one area. A stage with tables below it in another area. There were other waiters walking around with plates of food, as well as a bar toward the back of the ballroom. It was a sea of tuxedos and gowns.

Almost immediately, people began approaching Adrik. They would speak to him, shake his hand, and inevitably thank him for something he helped them with at some point. Somehow, he managed to remember every person’s name.

I leaned over to Andrei while Adrik was talking to yet another person. “How does he remember everyone’s name? I feel like I would fail that test miserably.”

“Me too,” he grinned at me.

Ivan and Stephen joined us. They stayed close, always within sight, but they tried to give Adrik and I room to mingle. Well, Adrik room to mingle. I didn’t know anybody. After like the 20th person came to speak to him, he walked to me. I felt his arm around my waist. He leaned down to my ear, “I need a break already. May I have this dance?” He stepped back and extended his hand to me. I took his hand, reluctantly.

“You know I don’t know how to dance, right?” I said quietly as I followed him to the dance floor.

He turned to me, holding one hand in his, wrapping his other arm around my waist. “Somehow, I think you’ll be a natural at this.” He pulled me close, so that my body was against his. “All you have to do, my love, is look at me and follow my lead.” He took a few steps, my legs following his motion instinctively. “And I happen to know for a fact, solnishko, that you are excellent at following my lead.”

I felt my cheeks flush as he effortlessly guided us around the floor. It felt like we were floating across the floor. Suddenly, everyone else disappeared and it was only he and I in the room with the music in the background. As the song came to an end, he slowed to a stop. We still hadn’t taken our eyes off each other. We heard clapping, breaking my daze. I looked around to discover we had been the only couple on the dance floor. The orchestra began a new song while people still clapped for us. I felt my cheeks flush. I looked down, not wanting to see everyone looking at me.

He leaned into me, kissing my cheek. “You’re the most gorgeous woman they’ve ever seen.”

I looked at his dark blue eyes, filled with so much love, and couldn’t help but smile at him. His lips to my ear, he quietly said, “why do I want to rip that dress off you every time you smile at me?”

I coughed, not expecting him to say that. He laughed, pulling me toward the bar. “Let’s get you some water, my love.”

Chapter Seventy

Sephie

The first half of the evening turned out to be quite predictable. Several people would come talk to Adrik, thanking him for some various business deal or philanthropy, Adrik getting tired of talking to people and dragging me onto the dance floor, only to have everyone else stop and watch us. Lather, rinse, repeat.

After the first dance, he never let go of me, which meant I also had to talk to people that I didn't know. I had to turn on all my charm and act the part, even though I think a little piece of me died each time I fake smiled at someone. I caught each of the guy's line of sight at some point, doing something ridiculous without anyone else seeing us. They all laughed and shook their heads at my silliness. I would make a ridiculous face at one of them, then go back to straight face, completely engrossed in yet another boring life story. It wasn't much, but it kept me entertained.

Eventually, I needed to visit the little girl's room. Before someone else could walk up to us, I pulled Adrik as far away from people as I could. I told him what I needed and he was just about to walk with me, when someone caught his arm. He looked to Ivan, who was closest to us, nodding toward me. Ivan was quickly beside me, offering me his arm.

"Princess?" he asked.

I leaned close to him, so I wouldn't be overheard, "I've gotta piss like a fucking racehorse and these people won't give us two seconds alone."

He laughed, walking me toward the restrooms. He stood outside the door, looking at his watch. "You have five minutes or I'm coming in after you."

I rolled my eyes, but then said, "I can make it in three."

I heard him laughing as I walked into the bathroom. There were two women already in there, talking to each other in the stalls. I tried not to listen, but they were somewhat tipsy and louder than they normally would've been. They were. talking about Adrik.

"I heard he was gay because he hasn't been seen in public with a woman in years," the first one said.

"Well, either she's a beard for him or he's clearly not gay. I never believed the gay rumors anyway. One of my friends knows one of his former girlfriends. She said he was always an asshole to her. He would regularly call her the wrong name," the second one said.

Yep, that's my Adrik.

I heard them come out of their stalls, the water in the sinks running. The second one adding, "you know, he never even told her his real name. No one knows his real name. It's like he's doesn't exist."

The first one said, "mysterious. And sexy." I heard her sigh. "I'd even settle for one of his bodyguards. Have you seen the men he has protecting him? I'd love a ride on one of them."

I was on a tight time schedule here, so I couldn't wait for them to leave before I came out. I walked to the sinks, looking at both of their shocked faces. As I quickly washed my hands, I looked at both of them. They both looked like the type of woman that Max would regularly go for. The kind that Adrik said he used to date when he was younger.

They probably spent hours putting on their makeup each day. I could almost guarantee that none of the guys would find them attractive enough for anything serious. They might sleep with them and then never speak to them again, but I was fairly certain it wouldn't go beyond that.

As seriously as I could, I said, "I could introduce you, if you like, but I know for a fact they appreciate boldness, so you'll get farther if you introduce yourself." I turned and walked out. I opened the door wide enough to let them see Ivan waiting for me just outside, staring at his watch. He smiled at me as he said "Just under three minutes, princess. Impressive." He offered his arm to me as I glanced back at the two women in the restroom, winking at them as I slid my arm into his, just before the door closed.

Of course, Ivan noticed. "What was that, princess?"

I giggled. "So those two were talking about you guys. One of them wants to ride one of you. I told them I could introduce them to you, but that you guys appreciated boldness so they should introduce themselves."

He looked down at me, a devilish grin on his face. "You're a little evil. You know we can't talk to anybody while we're working."

"I may have known that. That may be why I told them to come talk to you."

He squeezed my arm in his and patted my hand. "I'm glad you're back, princess. Life is more fun with you around."

I rested my head on his shoulder as we walked to find Adrik.

The second half of the evening was the fundraising dinner, so everyone shifted to the tables that had been set up below the stage. I was happy enough to be able to sit down for a bit. Adrik kept me much more active than I was expecting to be in heels. I hadn't fallen yet, but I think it was more to do with his support on the dance floor than anything.

The guys were standing in the shadows, keeping a close eye on literally everything and everyone. There were several speakers and then Adrik was to get his award. He leaned over to whisper in my ear, "you'll be alone at the table just for a few minutes. They've got eyes on you. If anything happens, they'll be to you within seconds." He looked at me, the intensity in his eyes like he was discussing business. "No matter what, you will be fine." He leaned in to kiss me, surprising me with the passion of the kiss. It felt like he was trying to tell me something with the kiss.

They started to introduce him, so he stood to walk to the side of the stage. He kissed me once more quickly, before standing and disappearing from my sight behind the curtains. He had taken his jacket off and left it on his chair.

There were only a few other people at our table, as most who had been there earlier were now on the stage, or waiting to go on the stage. The other people were on the other side of the table, turned away from me to watch the speaker at the microphone. I glanced behind me, spotting Ivan step just far enough out of the shadows that I could see him.

Adrik's introduction ended and everyone stood to applaud. He walked out to accept his award. He was supposed to say a few words after accepting his award, then he would be back. The applause grew louder. Everyone was on their feet. I glanced over the crowd, proud that all these people loved Adrik so much. Just as I glanced away, there was a commotion on stage. I looked back to the stage as I saw Adrik clutch his chest, falling forward. I glanced behind me, to see Ivan and Viktor rush to the stage. I froze for a second. Just as I was about to rush to the stage as well, I felt hands. grab me. One arm around my waist, another over my mouth so I couldn't scream.

I knew immediately this was not one of the guys. I had sparred with all of them. I'd escaped their grips. I knew what their arms around me felt like. This was a stranger. I struggled against their hold on me, bringing my knees up as we approached the back door to the ballroom, hoping to grab the doorframe with my legs. I managed to just catch the doorframe, causing the person holding me to stumble to the side. I stomped on his foot and elbowed him as hard as I could. He bent over, loosening his grip. I was standing on my own, but his arms were still around me, albeit looser. I turned toward him, putting both hands together, I swung my arms toward his face, hitting him with both fists. He fell backward momentarily before shaking his head and grabbing me again. I went limp, causing his grip to loosen again and managed to get a few steps away from him when he grabbed me again. This time he threw me over his shoulder and ran from the ballroom. We ran through a kitchen. I tried to grab anything I could to hit him with, but nothing stopped him. I was pounding my fists into his back as hard as I could as he ran with me.

We made it outside and he was met by another man. The guy that had me said something to the second guy who ran to a waiting vehicle, grabbed a zip tie and came back to me. Within seconds, he had bound my hands together. They pushed me toward the vehicle and into the backseat. They both jumped in the front seats and the vehicle took off. We were still downtown. They were weaving through the side streets. I sat up, waiting for the next turn. As soon as he slowed to make the turn, I opened the door and jumped out. I rolled down the street, taking longer than I expected to stop. I heard the brakes screech and the vehicle reversed quickly. I got up as quickly as I could and started running. I wasn't sure where I was. I just knew I needed to get away from them. The vehicle sped up even more, closing the distance to me. I ran as fast as I possibly could, but they eventually caught up to me. The second guy jumped out and grabbed me. He threw me back into the back seat and climbed in beside me. He kept a tight grip on my arms as the vehicle sped off again.

Chapter Seventy-One

Sephie

We left downtown and d rove away from the city. They pulled up to the small, private airport just outside the city. Sh it. They're never going to find me. As soon as I saw the jet on the runway, I started to panic. I couldn't let them get me on that plane.

The SUV pulled up beside the plane. Both men jumped out. They tried to pull me out of the backseat, but I kicked one of them in the face. I heard him curse me in Italian, confirming my fears that they were bad news. The other one came to the other side and grabbed me by the shoulders. "Don't make me hurt you," he said as he dragged me toward the plane. He picked me up and threw me over his shoulder to walk me up the few stairs to the plane. I grabbed the door frame and tried to get free, but he broke my grip and walked me onto the plane. He threw me into a seat toward the rear of the plane.

"You, stay. Or I sh oot you," he said, pulling a gun from his boot. He slipped my shoes off before leaving me, his anger clearly visible on his face that I had kicked his buddy. Might be the only perk for wearing heels…

I pulled my knees to my chest, burying my head in my arms. All I could think about now was Adrik. I kept replaying everything over and over in my head. I had only glanced away for a second. When I looked back, he was going down, grabbing his chest. I remember seeing Ivan and Viktor running to him. I couldn't see the other three guys. Then I was grabbed. What the fu ck happened? And more importantly, how was I going to get out of this situation?

There was only one exit from the plane. And it was guarded. Why weren't we taking off? They were just standing around, like they were waiting for something. I buried my head again, the tears coming full force now. For all I knew, Adrik was dead. How was I supposed to live without him?

I was sobbing now. I couldn't imagine a life without him. My body started shaking uncontrollably. I didn't care. I didn't care about anything. The only thing I could feel was the gaping ho le forming in my chest as I replayed the scene of Adrik going down over and over again.

I heard vehicles pull up outside the plane. Voices. Doors being opened and sh ut on the vehicles and then the underside of the plane. Footsteps coming up to the plane. I didn't pick my head up. I didn't care to see who had taken me. Nothing mattered anymore if Adrik wasn't in my life.

I kept my head down, hugging my knees as tightly as I could with my hands bound. I heard another vehicle pull up outside. More voices. More doors opening and closing. More footsteps coming up to the plane.

I heard someone walk toward me and stop in front of me. I just curled into a tighter ball, expecting the worst. I heard the click of a knife blade being extended and flinched. I felt warm hands on mine and then my hands were free.

"Princess. You're very difficult to kidnap. You look like h ell. Boss is going to be pi ssed."

I was still so scared that his familiar voice didn't register. I just kept my head down, my body still shaking, still convinced of my imminent death. I heard him kneel in front of me, his hands on my shoulders. I flinched at his touch, still trying to get away from him. I heard him curse in Russian.

"Sephie." He shook me gently. "Look at me, Sephie. You're safe."

I peeked at him. I recognized him. Ivan. My brain still not registering what was happening. I just buried my head again, rocking back and forth, shaking uncontrollably. I heard loud voices outside this time. One sounded familiar. Rushed footsteps up the steps to the plane, toward me. They stopped short of me.

His loud voice, "WHAT THE FU CK! YOU WERE NOT SUPPOSED TO HARM HER!"

The voice that had threatened to sh oot me said, "she fought back. Hard. She jumped out of the vehicle. We barely caught her. You guys didn't tell us she was so fuc king fast. Or strong. I think she broke Alfredo's face. She kicked him in the face when we tried to get her out of the vehicle."

Footsteps. Hands on me. These hands were different. My body instantly relaxed when I felt these hands. I was still too scared to look, still rocking back and forth.

"Persephone, love. Look at me."

I hugged my knees closer to me, shutting my eyes tighter. That voice. That was the voice I wanted to hear more than anything in the world. The one voice that I would never hear again. The tears started flowing again. I started rocking back and forth. "No, no, no. It can't be. It can't be." I said quietly to myself.

"Sephie. Look at me, please. Solnishko. It's me, Adrik."

"No, I saw him go down on the stage. This is a cr uel joke."

"It was fake. We needed everyone to believe I was killed. I'm very much alive, I assure you. Please look at me." He turned his head, giving orders in Russian. I heard activity outside the plane, more footsteps boarding the plane. My head was starting to pound. I peeked at him while his head was turned. The lights were so bright, but there was something familiar about his profile. I squinted, trying to adjust to the light. I reached out and touched his face lightly." He didn't move. He just closed his eyes, leaning into my touch. A single tear fell from his eye.

"It can't be you. I saw you go down. I saw everybody run to you."

He took a deep breath. He turned his head, his blue eyes filled with tears as he looked at me with nothing but regret. "This was not how this was supposed to go. You were not supposed to get hurt."

He tried to find a place that he could rest his hands, but my road rash was even worse this time. Pro tip: don't jump out of a moving vehicle in lace and satin. It offers zero protection from the hard concrete. As he looked me over, another tear fell from his eye. I reached up and wiped his eye with my thumb.

"Please forgive me, solnishko. Please forgive me." His head dropped, resting against my legs. I felt fresh tears welling up in my eyes. I wanted to touch his hair. I wanted to console him. My head was pounding so badly that I could barely think.

I lightly touched his hair. "Is it really you?"

He looked up at me, hopeful, his eyes wet with tears. "It's really me, solnishko."

I stared at him for a few minutes, not saying anything. My brain still struggling to process everything. He never took his eyes off me. I reached out and touched his face again. "You know your old girlfriends are still mad because you never told them your name?"

He laughed, his smile pulling at something in my chest.

The plane moved forward on the runway, taxiing for take-off. I tensed. Before I knew what happened, he had lifted me from the seat to a couch on the other side of the plane. He put me in his lap, his arms wrapped tightly around me. I rested my head on his shoulder. "My head really hurts," I said before closing my eyes and letting the darkness take over.

Chapter Seventy-Two

Sephie

I was back in the ballroom, watching Adrik go down, over and over. Each time, I was frozen in place, like I couldn't move until I was grabbed from behind. Each time the guy grabbed me, he said something that I couldn't hear or understand.

I heard voices. Familiar voices.

"Princess…"

"Gazelle…"

"Spider monkey….."

"Sestrichka…"

"Solnishko…"

A different voice would pull me briefly out of the ballroom each time, only to return to have to watch the scene again and be frozen in place again. It felt like I was drowning, watching him go down, not being able to do anything about it. I couldn't save him. I couldn't even save myself.

I felt arms around me, shifting me, holding me. Warmth that made my body relax. Fingers in my hair. Back in the ballroom, watching him go down again. This time, I found myself crying. I couldn't watch anymore. I shut my eyes. I can't watch anymore. I can't take it. I would rather have the darkness than be forced to watch this over again.

I hear a voice, calling my name. Everything is darkness. I can only see my body, nothing else. It's like I'm swimming in the nothing. The voice is still there. Calling me. I try to go toward it. It gets louder. I can hear it clearer.

"Sephie, please come back to me. I can't possibly live without you. Please just follow the sound of my voice. Come back to me. I love you."

I know that voice. I want to go to that voice. I try to go toward that voice, only to hear a new voice. "He's lying. He doesn't love you. No one loves you. No one will ever love you." I know this voice too. I know those words. Grant would say those words over and over to me as he was beating me. Like he was beating those words into me.

No, no, no. It can't be him. I got away from him. I locked that voice away tight.

"You didn't lock it up tight enough, stupid girl. I'm still here."

Again, the voice calling me. "Sephie, please come back to me. Follow the sound of my voice. I love you."

The other voice, laughing. "He's so pathetic. Begging you to come back to him, like you're worth a damn. Sickening."

I feel the familiar pull toward the voice calling me. I want to go toward it, but every time I move toward it, the other voice comes out.

"Solnishko, you have to wake up, my love. You have to come back to me, malishka."

I move toward it again. The other voice, yelling now, "YOU THINK HE LOVES YOU? YOU'RE MORE STUPID THAN I THOUGHT. NOBODY WILL EVER LOVE YOU, STUPID GIRL."

No, no, no." It can't be right. He can't be right. It's not right.

1 bring my knees to my chest, hugging them tightly.

"YOU THINK THAT'S GOING TO PROTECT YOU?! YOU CAN'T GET AWAY FROM ME, GIRL."

"Solnishko, I love you. I've loved you since the first time I laid eyes on you. You have my heart. You will always have my heart. You're the only woman who knows my name."

Suddenly, I'm in a bathroom, listening to women talk. One of them says, "you know he never even told her his real name? No one knows his real name. It's like he doesn't exist."

"LISTEN TO HER. HE DOESN'T EXIST."

"Sephie, you know my name. I love hearing my name on your tongue. I can't get enough of you saying my name. I never hesitated to tell you my name that night in the parking lot. You're the only woman that knows my name."

Adrik. Adrik is calling me! I have to go to him. Wherever he is, that's where I need to be.

"YOU CAN'T GET AWAY FROM ME AGAIN, STUPID GIRL."

SHUT UP! You're not real!

"OH, I'M VERY REAL. I'M NEVER GOING AWAY AGAIN NOW THAT I'M OUT."

Stop it! You're not real. I got away from you. You can't hurt me anymore.

"Sephie, I love you."

I have to go to him. I need him. I love him.

"YOU AIN'T GOING ANYWHERE."

I'd had enough. Enough of the doubt, enough of his abuse, enough of carrying him around with me for years, enough of his voice in the back of my head anytime I was unsure of myself. Enough!

"YOU CAN'T GET RID OF ME"

I'm not the same Sephie you knew. This Sephie fights back. This is the Sephie that would drive that knife through your heart instead of slicing your Achilles tendon and not shed a tear over it.

I'm suddenly back in the basement. My back is on fire, there's blood everywhere. My blood. Grant is a few steps away from me, catching his breath. This is my chance to get away from him. I try to get up, feeling the familiar object in my pocket. I discreetly pull it out of my pocket, clicking it open as quietly as possible. He must've heard the click, because now he's walked toward me. I grip the handle tightly, waiting for my chance.

He stops beside me, swinging his leg back like he's going to kick me. I grab his foot as he's about to kick me and slice as hard as I can across the back of his ankle. He crashes to the floor, screaming in pain. The knife is still in my hand. I stand up as quickly as I can, looking at him writhing on the floor in pain. He rolls onto his back and all I see is red. Without even thinking, I jumped on him, plunging the knife as deeply into his chest as I can get it to go. He sputters, coughing up blood. I stand up once again, watching him struggle to hold onto life. He reaches for me, trying to grab my leg. I raise my leg out of his grasp, letting my heel land with as much force as I can muster on the knife sticking out of his chest, driving it farther into his chest. I hear him take his last breath as I'm running up the stairs.

I run to my room, grabbing my stuff. I glanced at myself in the mirror, realizing that I'm covered in blood. I look for something to cover my back.

"Sephie, I love you. Please come back to me."

I'm coming. I have to get away. Please wait for me".

I find a jacket and throw it on. When the fabric hits my back, I scream.

I'm no longer in my bedroom. Everything is so bright. I feel arms around me and I flinch, trying to get away.

"Sephie, it's me. You're safe."

say something I blink, trying to get my eyes to focus. Everything is still so bright that I can't see anything. I hear him in Russian and hear movement around me. Sliding. Suddenly it's darker. I open my eyes slowly. They're able to adjust better in lower light. I see a face in front of me and hear that voice. The voice that pulled me out of my nightmare.

"Sephie, it's me. It's Adrik. You're safe now. Look at me."

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 73

Chapter Seventy-Three

Sephie

I blink again, this time able to see his eyes. Those blue eyes that I love. I search them, trying to figure out if it’s really him. He looks at me with nothing but concern at first, but when he sees me searching his eyes, he looks at me with nothing but love and adoration. He smiles faintly, “It’s me, Sephie. Pinky swear.”

I climb into his lap, holding onto him like he’s the only anchor in the middle of a hurricane. Tears fall uncontrollably. He wraps his arms around me, running his hands over my back, trying to calm me down. “Shhh…you’re okay now. You’re safe now. No one will ever hurt you again. Especially not Grant.”

I sobbed harder, clinging to him. “I think I killed him,” I said, mumbling in between breaths. “I think I stabbed him in the heart, I think I killed him.”

He wrapped his arms around me tighter. “I love you, Sephie. Nothing will ever change that.”

“It’s really you?” I asked, leaning back to look at him. “How are you not dead?”

“Before I went on stage, I put on a bulletproof vest. That’s why I left my jacket at the table. Made it easier to get it on and my shirt back on quickly. We needed everyone to believe I died and you were kidnapped. I’m sorry, solnishko. I should’ve told you. We underestimated how much you would fight back.”

I suddenly remembered being grabbed in the ballroom and everything that happened after. I reached back and slapped him as hard as I possibly could. “YOU LET THEM KIDNAP ME!”

Suddenly, Ivan was pulling me off his lap. “Easy, princess.” He set me down, which was his mistake. I delivered a punch squarely to his nose, causing him to step back, blood gushing from his nose. “AND YOU! YOU LET THEM TAKE ME TOO. YOU WERE THE CLOSEST ONE TO ME. YOU STEPPED FORWARD SO I COULD SEE YOU ONLY TO RUN IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION WHILE THEY FU CKING TOOK ME!”

I was seeing red at this point. I was so angry; I couldn’t see past that. I felt Andrei’s hands on my shoulders. “Spider monkey…” I didn’t give him time to say anything else. I grabbed his shoulders and kneed him as hard as I could in the groin. He doubled over in pain. “DON’T FU CKING TOUCH ME!”

Misha and Viktor both stood in front of me, neither of them touching me, but both trying to calm me down. They both had their hands up, like they were trying to corner a caged animal.

“Gazelle, I wanted to tell you. I told them it would end horribly if they didn’t tell you the plan. I saw what happened to that guy that attacked you. I knew it was a bad idea.”

I looked at Misha, glaring at him. “What fu cking plan. And if you lie to me, so help me, I’ll rearrange your face too.”

1 heard Viktor’s deep voice, trying to calm me down, say, “we got word that they were going to try to assassinate Boss at the ball. They were going to kidnap you at the same time, just in case the assassination attempt didn’t work. It would be the only time you were vulnerable. The people they put in place for the plan were loyal to us. The guys that took you work for Armando, not Salvadori. They clearly had no idea what they were signing up for, though. You were not an easy target.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, my headache coming back in full force. “Why in the fu ck did nobody tell me about this plan?”

Misha said, “the guy that grabbed you says he told you on the way out, but he thinks it was so loud that you didn’t hear him. You fought back so hard that he just wanted to get you to the plane by any means necessary. That’s why they zip tied your hands. They definitely were not expecting you to jump out of the vehicle. You almost killed yourself.” I felt his hand on my shoulder. My eyes were still closed, as my head was still pounding.

1 held a finger up. “Don’t. Touch. Me.”

“Okay, gazelle. Just breathe.”

“Why the fu ck did nobody tell me about this plan before some random a ss mo therfucker grabbed me? And if you don’t tell me the truth this time, you’re all going down. I will take this fu cking plane down with all of you in it. I have no problem destroying myself in the pursuit of destroying every go ddamn one of you right now.”

I heard Ivan’s muffled laughter from behind me, which only served to make me angrier. I looked at Misha. “TALK. NOW.”

“We needed everyone to believe the original assassination attempt had been successful and we needed the kidnap attempt to look believable. The place was crawling with cameras, on purpose. Salvadori wanted ample proof of what happened. We had to sell it. The only way to sell you being kidnapped was to actually kidnap you. We didn’t expect it to go so…. poorly.”

I looked from him to Viktor. They both looked awful. I glanced at Stephen, who was standing behind them. He looked equally as bad. I turned to look at Andrei, who was still in pain, sitting in one of the seats. Ivan wouldn’t make eye contact with me. Adrik was standing behind me. He wanted to come to me, I know he did, but he was scared I was going to hurt him. The look on his face made my heart hurt, but at the same time, I was still so angry they had all agreed to lie to me that I didn’t know what to do.

I stood for a moment, pinching the bridge of my nose. I just wanted to cry. I felt so betrayed. I had trusted every one of them with my life and they had all lied to me. I was never going to be able to get the image of Ivan running away from me out of my head. I was never going to be able to unsee Adrik going down on stage.

I turned and walked toward the back of the plane. Toward Adrik. For a moment, he looked relieved, until I stepped around him. He went to grab me, but I moved away from his grasp. “Don’t touch me. Don’t fu cking touch me right now.”

Chapter Seventy-Four

Adrik

We fu cked up. I fu cked up. She almost died because of me. The guy that grabbed Sephie was supposed to get her to the back and tell her it was all fake, but she was fighting so hard that he didn't have a chance. Nobody expected her to jump from the vehicle and almost k ill herself. Now her headache was back and she was in pain, but I couldn't do anything. She wouldn't let anyone touch her.

I can't say I blame her for being angry with us. I was furious with myself. I almost told her the plan before I went on stage. I tried to warn her, but it didn't work. The part of the plan that involved her didn't work. In fact, it failed miserably. Now she clearly needed help, but no one could get close enough to her to help her.

I'm sure her concussion is back, only worse this time. It took her so long to recognize me. I'm worried she's really damaged her brain this time. Ivan pressed on her acupuncture points while she was out, but I don't know how effective it was. She was talking while she was out. She was back in the basement with her uncle. We all heard the whole thing. She was fighting that memory. She was fighting the thought pattern that he'd beat into her.

I was terrified I was going to lose her. She's angrier than any of us had ever seen her. She's furious with the guys, but when she looks at me, all I see is the pain I caused her. And what's worse, I have no idea how to make that pain go away.

We were still an hour out from Switzerland. We would land in Switzerland, transfer to a helicopter over the Alps to just inside Italy. We were extremely limited on where we could land in Italy without it being known we were there, but Armando had family with a ranch on the border of Switzerland where we could land a helicopter without being seen. From there, we would drive south to Naples. Sicily was a short boat ride from Naples. Armando's family controlled Naples, so we could move about in that city freely.

The plan was to find Anthony and Lorenzo in Sicily and take them both out as cleanly and quickly as possible. Without those two to back him, we doubted Salvadori would continue with his plan in the states to start a war. But he would be dealt with in much the same manner if he did decide to go through with it.

At this point, they were all under the impression that I was dead and that they had successfully kidnapped Sephie. Armando's men were to stage an "escape" in two days, to make it seem like she got away from them. They would spend time and manpower looking for her while we executed Anthony and Lorenzo.

Now I was more worried about Sephie than I was about Anthony and Lorenzo. I wanted to punch something I was so frustrated with how things turned out. It broke me to see her hurting, knowing I couldn't do anything to help her. She just sat quietly in the corner, not looking at anyone. Not saying anything. She cries now and then, rocks back and forth. I can see her shaking from across the plane. I'm dying to go to her. To hold her.

It always seemed to calm down the shaking when I would touch her. I want nothing more than to be able to go to her now, but she won't let anyone near her. Andrei, who is usually one of her favorites, tried and the glare she gave him was enough to stop him in his tracks.

We would be landing soon. We had packed clothes for her and wanted her to be able to change before we started the next leg of our journey. We all consulted with each other, trying to decide who should take her clothes to her. We decided that she was less mad at Misha, so he got volunteered. I've never seen that kid so scared in his life.

He walked slowly to her, talking to her so she wouldn't be surprised. She had her head down again. We could all hear her quietly crying, as she hugged her knees to her chest, rocking back and forth.

"Gazelle. Sephie. We brought you some clothes to change into. We should also get you cleaned up. Your road rash needs attention. Adrik can help you. We don't want anything to get infected. Please, Sephie. We want to help."

She looked up at him. Her face was red, her eyes puffy from the constant crying. She reached for the clothes without a word.

"You can change in the back. There's a door that closes so you have privacy. I can get you the first aid kit too."

She nodded her head but put her head back down. She laid the clothes beside her on the seat. Misha came back with the first aid kit for her. She reached for it too, without saying a word. She barely looked at him.

But at least she didn't punch him. I guess that counts for progress.

The look on Misha's face as he went to sit back down was one of utter despair. He looked like he was barely able to keep it together. We were all barely keeping it together right now.

She quietly got up and went to the back, shutting the door behind her. We could hear her sniffle now and then. It sounded like she had opened the first aid kit. Then we heard her cursing. She was putting antiseptic on her wounds. By herself. Because of me.

I leaned forward, putting my head in my hands. Tears fell from my eyes. I felt so helpless. We should've told her the plan. I wish I would've told her. She could've handled it.

Fu ck! Why didn't I tell her before I went on stage?

ed for Misha. He I wanted to punch something. I heard her curse louder and cry out. She was quiet and then she walked back to the door. "I need help," was all she said. He walked in, closing the door behind him. I tried not to be jealous. I tried to be grateful that she was at least letting one of us help her, but this was killing me.

I heard Misha quietly say, "that one's deep, Sephie. That doesn't look good." Then silence. Then, "it's okay. It's okay. We'll get it fixed. We'll get it bandaged right now and we'll get it looked at once we land. It'll be okay. Please don't cry."

He came out from the back a few moments later. The look on his face worse than before if that was even possible. He quietly said to me, "she's got a wound almost down to the bone on her hip. I packed it as best as I could, but it should definitely be looked at by someone other than me. Soon."

As soon as we landed, I would call ahead to Armando's family and ask them to have a doctor waiting for us when we got there. The flight from Switzerland to his family's ranch was a short one.

I heard the door open and she walked out in fresh clothes. She was visibly limping now. Her adrenaline rushes were beginning to wear off. I'm sure she was in excruciating pain right now. She walked back to her seat in the back, not looking at anyone. She tried to pull her knees to her chest again but flinched in pain. Definitely in excruciating pain.

Goddammit.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 75

Chapter Seventy-Five

Adrik

We landed soon after and transferred to the helicopter quickly. She allowed Misha to help her on the helicopter. Progress. She still said nothing to anyone. It was a quick flight to Armando's family's ranch, just inside Italy. They took us to the house right away. The doctor was waiting for Sephie. He didn't speak much English and we didn't speak any Italian, but he could see she was hurt. The lady in charge of the house, Isabella, could speak some English. Enough to get by. She went in with the doctor to help translate.

I paced in the courtyard of the house, waiting for the doctor to be done with her. He came out, with Isabella. He would speak, she would translate.

"He says most cuts not bad, heal soon. But cut on her hip bad. Can't stitch up. Might need, uh, more skin?" she pressed her hands together and placed them over her hip.

Skin graft. She might need a skin graft.

"He gave her antibiotics. Must take all of them. No infection or it get into her bone. That's very bad. Also gave her light sedative to help her sleep. She say her head hurt. He gave her pain pills too."

Good. And bad. We couldn't afford to have her sleep for three days again.

Ivan spoke up, "what pain pills? Name?"

Isabella asked the doctor to clarify, "Tramadol. Light pain pill. Shouldn't make her sleepy or make…" she pointed to her stomach and drew circles around her stomach.

It shouldn't upset her stomach. Good. Hopefully she wouldn't go for a week without eating again.

Ivan looked at me, "that's different from the one they gave her at home. Hopefully this one won't knock her out. We'll adjust the plan if it does. We'll just have to make new arrangements for travel."

We hadn't noticed Sephie come out of the room. "By all means, don't adjust anything on my account. I'm not taking them. I'm not risking sleeping for three days again." She had one hand pressing on her hip, the other on her head. I couldn't help it. I went to her without thinking. She flinched when I touched her, but she didn't slap me this time. My hands went to her hair, trying to give her some kind of relief from her headache. She sighed. She was exhausted. I think that's the only reason she allowed me to touch her. She didn't have the strength to fight me right now. At this point, I was so desperate to touch her that I would take any in I could get.

I gently took her hand from her hip. I pressed on the spot that Ivan had showed me. She closed her eyes tightly. Ivan walked to her other side, taking her other hand from her head. She didn't resist. She also wouldn't open her eyes. He pressed on the spot on her other hand, trying to give her the most relief we could. We both saw the tears falling down her cheeks as she stood there.

Isabella showed the doctor out and came back to show the other guys their rooms. Ivan and I stayed with Sephie. If she was going to allow us to touch her, we weren't leaving until she told us to. Especially not when we could maybe give her some relief.

We stood there for twenty minutes before she started to show signs of relaxing. She finally took a deep breath and opened her eyes. She didn't have, as she called it, a murderous aura any longer. She just looked tired.

She looked broken.

Misha came back to show us to our rooms, as Isabella had gone to prepare dinner. We were staying here tonight, but then we had planned on leaving first thing in the morning to make it to Naples by tomorrow late afternoon. However, it now all depended on Sephie. We were traveling by motorcycle, as they were faster, and we could get through city traffic faster on bikes than in a car. I was worried about her riding that long while her hip was in pain.

Misha showed Ivan his room, then showed me where Sephie and I would be staying. I wasn't sure she would want to share a bed with me, but we really didn't have a choice. She walked in and sat down on the bed. She looked like a shell of herself. She wouldn't look at me. She just stared ahead at the wall.

"Do you want to shower before dinner?" Tears welled in her eyes again. She looked down at the floor, trying to control the tears threatening to fall. I sat down on the bed beside her, pulling her to my side. She rested her head on my shoulder, but she made no attempt to touch me. She usually couldn't keep her hands off me, just like I couldn't keep my hands off her. It broke my heart.

"Come, we'll shower. I'll wash your hair." She didn't say a word, but she followed me when I pulled her toward the bathroom.

It took me a little longer than I thought to get all the hair pins out of her hair. She was right. That's a lot of effort for nonsense. I found myself thinking back to when I first turned around to see her in that dress. It was absolutely perfect for her. She was modest, so it covered everything she was concerned with strangers seeing, but she showed enough leg that there was no missing her s ex appeal. I thought about that first dance we had. The other girlfriends I'd had were never good dance partners. They were always fighting to lead. Sephie was different. She let me lead, completely surrendering to me, making the dance magnificent. She trusted me completely.

And I completely destroyed that trust.

Chapter Seventy-Six

Adrik

I was lost in my thoughts in the shower, busy beating myself up over what had happened. I looked down, catching her staring up at me. She had a confused look in her eyes but said nothing. I was grateful for any eye contact, so I held it as long as she would let me. Trying to silently let her know I was sorry and that I loved her more than anything. She'd always been able to read my mind just by looking me in the eyes before. I'd hoped she was capable of doing so now. She stared at me for a few minutes, her eyes searching. Constantly searching. I let her read whatever part of my soul she was interested in. It all belongs to her. A tear fell from my eye as I looked into her sad eyes. She reached up and wiped it away with her thumb, leaving her hand on my face for a moment before dropping it along with her gaze. She allowed me to pull her to me and hold her. Her arms stayed limp at her sides, though.

She barely spoke at dinner, but she did eat. She ate a lot, even for her. She'd barely eaten the past three weeks, so it was good to see her appetite come back with a vengeance. The guys were quiet as well, all still feeling horrible about everything that had happened.

Viktor asked me in Russian, "should we change plans for tomorrow? Do we need to arrange for a car instead? Or do you want to wait a day to leave?"

I thought for a few moments. "Let's see how tonight goes and how she is in the morning. The drive to Naples will still be faster if we take the bikes. I don't know which is worse, extending the trip out or making her ride a bike for 7 hours."

"Stop trying to change the plans because of me. I'll be fine," she said as she stood up and walked slowly back to our room for the night, leaving us all stunned.

We cleaned up after dinner and then all retired to our rooms. Sephie was laying on the bed, on top of the covers. She was laying on her good hip, which meant she was facing the door. She had taken her pants off, her road rash on full display. I took my shirt off and slipped out of my jeans, crawling in bed behind her. I was suddenly exhausted and wanted nothing more than to hold her for a few hours.

As carefully as I could, I wrapped my arms around her. I had hoped she would snuggle back into me. She did not. But she made no moves to get out of my grasp, either. This will have to do for now.

Sometime during the night, I woke to her struggling in her sleep. She called my name and then she called for Ivan. She was replaying the scene in the ballroom. She did it over and over on the plane. She would call out my name, then Ivan's name, then she would struggle. That's when I started to talk to her. It seemed like it would help to calm her and it seems like it's what eventually broke the cycle.

I tried it again. "Sephie, I love you, solnishko. Please come back to me. I can't live without you."

She sighed and I felt her push her body back into mine. I held her tighter. She was calm for a few minutes. Just when I thought she had fallen into a peaceful sleep, she called out for me again. Then Ivan. Then she began struggling.

"Sephie, I love you. I'm here. I'm not going anywhere. I don't care how many times I need to tell you for you to believe it again, but you're my everything."

Quiet. Instead of waiting for her to start the cycle again, I kept talking to her. "I've loved you since the first night I saw you, when you were standing at the bar. Your eyes were so wide when you saw Viktor and Andrei walk in. It was adorable. But then you locked eyes with me and I saw the look in your eye immediately change, giving me that spark that only I can see. Your friend Max had to push you to come show us to the meeting room. You almost tripped on your way to us. I was trying desperately to control myself as you walked closer. You were so cute. When you asked what you could get us to drink and Viktor told you waters for all of us, you cocked your head to the side and said "different." Then you immediately got worried you had offended me. It was all I could do not to kiss you right then. I stepped close to you, able to smell the floral scent of your shampoo. It drove me crazy. I sat down at the table and all I could think about was running my hands through your hair and what it would look like not in a braid."

She sighed and made the quiet cooing noise she sometimes made when I would run my hands through her hair while she was sleeping. I reached up and ran my hand lightly through her hair. She started to roll over to face me but cried out when she hit her bad hip. She sat up, cursing, but still asleep. I got up and moved to the other side of her so she could lay across my chest, without having to lay on her bad hip.

She settled onto my chest, my hand still running through her hair. After just a few minutes, her fingers were lightly playing on my chest, and I knew she was having better dreams. I drifted back to sleep, while she played her favorite songs on my heart

Chapter Seventy-Seven

Ivan

We all retired to our rooms for the night. I laid on the bed, trying to sleep. I was physically and mentally exhausted, but there was going to be no sleep in my immediate future. My mind kept replaying the look on Sephie's face in the ballroom as she saw Boss going down. She looked to us for help and we had to run right past her. I glanced over my shoulder as Armando's man grabbed her. I'll never be able to forget her face when she felt him grab her.

Fear. She was legitimately scared for her life, but I think she was more scared for Adrik. I've seen that look before. When the one you love more than life itself is dying in front of you. That's a look I wish to never see again.

When we were on the plane, Sephie had finally passed out from stress, but her mind was replaying the nights events too. We'd never heard her talk in her sleep. She's fallen asleep around all of us at least once and never once had she talked in her sleep. Adrik thought she was awake at first.

She would desperately call for him, but then she would desperately call for me. She knew I was the closest one to her before everything happened. She trusted that I would save her and I ignored her. I could hear her voice calling to him, then me, over and over again while we were on the plane. It felt like it went on for hours. My heart broke & little more each time.

Now I was stuck replaying those scenes. Thinking about how I had let her down. The one woman I had let get close to me again. I knew she and Adrik belonged together, but I couldn't help but love her too. We all did.

After a few hours of staring at the ceiling, I got up to get a glass of water from the kitchen. I stood against the counter, now staring at the floor, my mind still on the loop of everything that had happened. I knew we had fucked up bad when she wouldn't look at me on the plane. I was the first one to see her. She was so scared that she couldn't see past it. She didn't trust her own brain to recognize me. Or Adrik. We fucked up bad.

I refilled my glass, sighing. I heard footsteps approaching the kitchen. Misha. He looked at me, "you can't sleep either, huh?"

I shook my head no. "I can't stop seeing her, first in the ballroom, then when she was curled up in the seat on the plane when we first got to her, and I can't stop hearing her calling for Adrik and me while she was out."

Misha nodded. "Not gonna lie, I did get some enjoyment out of replaying her decking you," he said, his hand on my shoulder. I knew he was just trying to make me laugh, but I deserved the hit. I deserved so much more than what she did.

He grabbed a glass and filled it. We stood in silence until more footsteps could be heard coming toward us. Viktor. "At least I'm not the only one," he said.

"Yeah, man. I gave up. It's not going to happen," Misha said.

No sooner had Viktor filled his glass with water than Andrei came into the kitchen. That dude probably got it the worst out of all of us. Hits to your junk are one of the worst spots possible. Stephen walked in shortly after Andrei. We all stood in silence for a few moments. Misha broke the silence. "Well, now that we're all here, how are we going to fix this?"

I was proud of that kid. I had no idea how she was doing it but being around Sephie had made that kid step into his own. He was the youngest of all of us, only barely older than Sephie. He had always been good at his job, but he lacked confidence. Sephie managed to somehow get that kid to believe in himself. Even after the attack on the sidewalk. I was worried he was going to take a few steps back in his progress. It was a blow to his ego, really. She pulled him aside one night and read him the riot act in her subtle way and he turned it around after. None of us knew what she said to him, but she was the only one that could've saved him from himself in that situation.

1 was surprised at how well he was handling this situation. He told her the truth on the plane. He had argued with us for hours about telling her the plan. He told us he had a bad feeling it would go bad if we didn't. Turns out the kid was right. We were so worried about making it look authentic that we didn't stop to consider what it would do to her. Misha was the only one that thought about that, but four against one meant that he was now paying for our poor decision just like the rest of us.

Andrei sighed. "We can't leave today. There's no way we can move her when she's like this. I don't know how long it's going to take or what it's going to take to make her better, but she can't leave like this."

Everyone agreed. "So, we stay here a couple of days. Shouldn't alter the plan too much, honestly. We still have eyes on Anthony and Lorenzo. We'll know what they're planning. I would prefer to be closer, but we can make this work," I said.

"What about Adrik? He wants vengeance for Sephie. He wants Anthony dead. Will he be willing to push pause for a day or two? I know Sephie means more to him than anything, but his taste for blood is unparalleled when it comes to those that wrong him. I've never seen him give that up," Viktor asked. Viktor had been with Adrik the longest out of all of us. Before I showed up, even. Adrik was very much like his father when he first took over the business. He would personally take care of people that had wronged him. He had as much blood on his hands as the rest of us.

Stephen spoke. "We don't give him a choice. There are things in life that are more important than vengeance." He paused, adding, "if he's hell bent on getting revenge, then he can send a few of us to take care of Anthony and Lorenzo. Without him."

I considered the options for a moment. I rubbed my face with my hand. My nose still didn't feel right. She had almost broken my nose. If she had been able to eat and train for the three weeks before, she would have, but she had lost some of her strength. I did have a black eye from it though, so she still landed a solid hit. "I don't think it will be that difficult to talk him into staying an extra day or two. Not if she's not feeling better when she wakes up this time."

We stayed in the kitchen talking about variations to the plan until the sun came up. In the original plan, we were supposed to be leaving shortly. We heard nothing from Adrik's room. We weren't sure if he had overslept or if something was wrong. We had ditched our phones before getting on the plane. We had burner phones in our bags, but we hadn't turned them on yet.

I went to his door and knocked quietly. I heard him softly tell me to come in. He was on the bed, in his underwear, on top of the covers, with Sephie laying across his chest, sound asleep. She was just in her t-shirt, giving me a full look at the wounds on her legs. It was bad. He put his finger up to his lips, but motioned me to come in.

I walked next to the bed, as quietly as possible. The other guys were outside in the hallway, looking in through the open door. I saw the slight relief come to all our faces when we saw she was sleeping peacefully on him.

He whispered, "I can't move. Anytime I try to leave, she starts crying out for me in her sleep again, then she'll call for you. Stuck in that loop that she was in on the plane. I come back and put her on my chest, and she sleeps peacefully again." He pointed to her fingers, lightly moving on his chest in a rhythmic pattern. "This is how I know she's in a happy place. She plays the piano." I couldn't help but smile. Seeing her happy made me suddenly happy.

He looked down at her, lightly running his hands through her hair. She snuggled into him more, making a quiet whimper noise. He looked back at me pain evident in his eyes. "She wants nothing to do with me when she's awake, but she won't let me go when she's asleep."

I sighed. "She will come around. Her subconscious is still clearly attached to you. She just needs time to process everything. It will take her time to forgive all of us." I paused, not really wanting to talk business now. "Boss, we can't leave with her like this. She needs time. We all discussed it this morning. We don't think we should leave with her. Either we stay here for a day or two more and give her a chance to recover, or you stay here with her, and we go on with the original plan."

He was quiet for a moment, thoughtfully running his hands through her long curls. "We'll stay. Nothing matters more than her. I won't ever risk losing her for anything again. They can take my empire. I don't want it if I can't have her."

I stood, placing my hand on his shoulder. I turned and walked back to the expectant looks on the guys in the hall. I closed the door quietly behind me, motioning for everyone to move from the door so we could give her quiet to sleep. We walked back to the kitchen.

"He agrees," I said. "He said he won't risk losing her again for anything and I agree. His empire is replaceable. She is not."

There was a collective exhale. We were all happy to stay a little longer. If she couldn't go with us, none of us wanted to leave.

Chapter Seventy-Eight

Sephie

I was so exhausted that I fell asleep quickly, despite feeling as awful as I did. Adrik came into the room and climbed into bed behind me. He was trying to be as gentle as he could, which I appreciated. I wanted him to hold me, but I was still so mad at him that I couldn't tell him that.

I had no dreams at first, but eventually I found myself back in the ballroom. I watched Adrik fall to the ground, screaming for him. Then I would look toward Ivan, running away from me. I would scream for him, and the vision would restart.

This time, when I screamed for Adrik, I heard his voice. The scene around me faded and I was back to the abyss. The void where I could see my body, but nothing around me. I heard his voice clearly now.

"Sephie, I love you, solnishko. Please come back to me. I can't live without you."

I tried to go toward the voice. It felt warmer. It was a stark contrast to the cold of the void. The warmth was surrounding me, making me feel safe. I lost his voice though. I couldn't find it and I was back in the ballroom, screaming for him once again as I watched him go down.

"Sephie, I love you. I'm here. I'm not going anywhere. I don't care how many times I need to tell you for you to believe it again, but you're my everything."

The warmth was back with his voice. I could feel it envelope me. I looked down at my arms and legs. They were brighter. I could see them more clearly. I could see just barely in front of me.

"I've loved you since the first night I saw you, when you were standing at the bar. Your eyes were so wide when you saw Viktor and Andrei walk in. It was adorable. But then you locked eyes with me and I saw the look in your eye immediately change, giving me that spark that only I can see. Your friend Max had to push you to come show us to the meeting room. You almost tripped on your way to us. I was trying desperately to control myself as you walked closer. You were so different from any woman I'd ever seen. When you asked what you could get us to drink and Viktor told you waters for all of us, you cocked your head to the side and said "different." Then you immediately got worried you had offended me. It was all I could do not to kiss you right then. I stepped close to you, able to smell the floral scent of your shampoo. It drove me crazy. I sat down at the table and all I could think about was running my hands through your hair and what it would look like not in a braid."

The void no longer felt cold at all. I could see in front of me. I could see where I was going. I could get out of here.

There was a path that I followed to a vaguely familiar house. As I got closer to the house, I could hear music coming from inside. Something felt right about this. Like I knew this house, even though I didn't recognize it. I walked the path to the front door. I pushed on it, opening it slowly. The music was louder now. I knew the song. It was my mother's favorite song. Who would be playing that song?

I walked inside, trying to be quiet so I wouldn't disturb the person playing. I couldn't see them yet, but the music was getting louder with each step I took inside the house. I could almost feel my fingers wanting to play the next note before I heard it.

I peeked into the first room I came to, revealing a grand piano. A man was sitting at the piano, absorbed by the music.

He hadn't heard me come inside the house, he just continued to play my mom's favorite song. I stood, motionless, watching him. Who was he? Why didn't I feel scared of him? How does he know that song?

When the song ended, he sat for a moment and stared at the keys. He sighed. Without turning to look at me, he said "Hello, Sephie baby. It's been a long time since you've seen me."

I looked at his back, confused. Just as I was about to speak, he turned around to face me. His face. It looked so familiar, yet not, at the same time. Like I'd looked at his picture for years and now that I was seeing him in person, it wasn't the same.

I gasped. "D-Dad…?"

He smiled, his eyes squinting like mine did when I smiled. He stood up and walked toward me, his arms wide. "Hey peanut." He wrapped his arms around me. "I've missed being able to hold you, little one. That's the one thing I miss the most. But I'm so proud of you. I've watched you grow up. I've been there the whole time and Sephie, I'm so proud of you." He hugged me tight.

"How? How are you here?"

"Eh, the logistics are a bit complicated. You can say I'm a bit of a guardian angel, if that's easier for you to understand."

I stepped back to look at him, my eyes wide. "You saw…everything?"

He chuckled. "Well, not everything everything. I know when to give you privacy. But every tough situation you've been in, I was there in case you needed me." He looked at me thoughtfully, brushing a curl from my face. "You know, you've never once needed me, Sephie."

"No, that's not true. In the…basement?" my voice cracked as I thought about that horrible night.

He closed his eyes, sighing. "That was the first time I thought you might need me. I was just about to step in when you saved yourself." He put his hands on both of my shoulders. "Sephie, look at me. What you did that night, it was meant to happen. Sometimes Karma uses you to deliver justice, if you will. You were simply the one that delivered his sentence."

I sucked in a breath. "So, I did. I did kill him that night?"

He nodded. "Nobody found him for months. The knife was mysteriously gone." He looked at me, raising one eyebrow.

"You?"

"Okay, maybe I helped just once. But I mean, seriously. Do you know how boring it is being the guardian of such a… capable child? You gotta throw me a bone once in a while, peanut."

I smiled at him. Clearly, he was where I got my sense of humor from.

"There's my beautiful girl. You know you can light the way for ships into harbor with your smile? You almost give Adrik a heart attack every time you smile at him. I'm not even joking about that one. We've had extra angels on standby because it got close a few times."

My smile faded, thinking about Adrik.

Chapter Seventy-Nine

Sephie

“You’re still mad at him. You have every right to be mad at him, peanut. He should’ve told you the plan, but I know he will never, ever underestimate your strength again as long as he lives. Do you know he hasn’t moved from underneath you for twelve hours now? He got up once to pee and you got su cked back into your nightmare. He hasn’t had anything to eat or drink since then and he won’t move so you can sleep in peace and your body can heal.”

“No, it hasn’t been that long. It’s only been a few hours.”

“Peanut, time is different here. He’ll lay there as long as it takes. I’ve never seen him so determined. And he’s got a bloodlust that is, well, impressive.”

I just looked at him, dumbfounded.

He smiled down at me. “You can remember being in the nothing, the darkness, before you found your way here?” I nodded my head. “Do you remember how every time you heard his voice, when he would tell you he loved you, how you got a little brighter and could see further into the darkness?” Again, I nodded. “It’s because he can’t exist without you and you can’t exist without him. You’re light, he’s dark. One cannot exist without the other. His darkness allows your light to shine. The brighter your light, the darker your shadows. You figured that part out on your own.” He made a fist and pressed it to my chin. “Seriously, chip off the ol’ block, you are.” He looked at me, a look of pride on his face. He cleared his throat and continued. “But Adrik hasn’t figured that out yet. Guys are sometimes slower on the uptake. You’re helping to show him that even though he has very dark shadows, he also has a very bright light. And right now, he’s the spark you needed to remember that your light is always within you. You’re the only one that can ever turn it off. You just momentarily forgot that part. Which is understandable. You’ve had a hectic few weeks. Years,” he added, clearing his throat again. “But what happened needed to happen. Not just for you, but for all of them. Each of them has something special to offer the world, but it never would’ve happened without the events at the ball. Misha, for example, has a gift that warns him when something isn’t right. He started to believe it more after the attack on you two, but the others didn’t. Now they do. That never would’ve happened otherwise. There’s always a reason, peanut. It’s your job to figure it out.”

I stared at him, trying to understand everything he just told me.

“You already know everything I’m telling you right now, peanut. You just have to let go of the fear. Sure, he fu cked up. They all did. Big time. You got hurt in the process, but you have yet to quit in situations much worse than this one. Don’t start now. You’ve got a 100% survival rate, remember that. And know that I’ll be there, ready to swoop in when needed. You should see my swoop. I practice a lot, because you know, you never need me. Whatever. It’s magnificent.”

I laughed at him. I definitely got his sense of humor.

He looked down at me, smiling. “You know you need him just as much as he needs you. They all need you and you need all of them. You’re destined for great things. Always have been. Why else would we have given you your name if you weren’t meant for great things?” He hugged me once more, then pulled me toward the piano. He sat me down on the bench. “Now, make an old man happy and play me your song.”

“My song? I don’t have a song.”

“You do. You call it your mo m’s favorite song, but it’s really your song. I used to sing it to you when you were a baby. I wrote the melody just for you, hoping that one day you would finish it. I didn’t even tell your mother that it was your song. She just thought it was some melody I had picked up somewhere and sang to you, but it’s yours. It’s always been yours.”

I looked up at him, with tears in my eyes. I suddenly missed all the time I had missed out on with him in my childhood. As if he was reading my mind, he said, “I know, peanut. I miss it too, but can you imagine both of us in the same room at the same time? I don’t think the world is ready for that many emotional support sloths.”

I laughed, tears falling on my cheeks. He sat down next to me, looking every bit a proud father. “Now, play for your old man, peanut.”

I played my song, as he sat next to me watching intently. When the song ended, he leaned his shoulder against mine. “It’s time for you to go back, kiddo. You’ve still got great things to accomplish, one of which is to love that man as hard as he loves you.”

“Will I get to see you again?” I asked.

“I’m always around. Practicing my swooping,” he made a swooping motion with his arm in front of me. He winked at me. “I love you, peanut.”

“I love you too, Dad.”

My eyelids fluttered open slowly. I heard Adrik snoring softly, felt his warm body beneath me. I lifted my head to look at him, but the slight movement jolted him awake. “Sephie? Are you okay??”

I rested my chin on his chest, looking at him. He looked stressed, his blue eyes were now also red. He looked like he hadn’t slept very much, if at all. He sat up a little so he could look at me better. I looked into his eyes, searching. I found what I was looking for immediately. He was looking at me with all the love and adoration as he always had, but now there was fear there. Worry that he had ruined it all.

I wasn’t sure what to say to make it go away, but I remembered what my father had said. “You almost give Adrik a heart attack every time you smile at him.” I closed my eyes for a moment, remembering my dream. When I opened my eyes, he was still looking at me, clearly worried about what I was going to do or not do.

“Sephie?” he asked, his voice cracked with worry.

I smiled at him. Like I hadn’t seen him in days, like I thought he was dead and now he was underneath me, watching over me while I fought my own darkness, like I loved him more than anything in the world.

It took him a moment. He was still concerned and confused, but he couldn’t help but smile back at me. I slowly lifted my very sore body off him, moving so I was sitting on his hips, straddling him. He sat up a little more so he could look me in the eyes. I reached out and ran my fingers lightly over his face, the way I knew he liked. He closed his eyes at my touch, his breath hitched. A single tear fell from the corner of each eye. I leaned into him and kissed him gently. He went to put his hands around me but stopped himself. He was still worried he was going to hurt me or I was going to do something rash. I leaned back so I could look into his eyes again. “I love you, Adrik. I will always love you. I love you more than anything I’ve ever known.” I looked into his eyes, relief washing over him. I added, “but if you ever let me think you’ve died when you haven’t again, I will ki ll you myself.”

He sat up, still wanting to grab me, but uncertain where his hands could go that wouldn’t hurt. He put both hands on either side of my face, looking deeply into my eyes. “I swear I will never leave you out of any plan ever again. I will never withhold information from you again. I almost lost you. I’m so sorry, Sephie. Can you ever forgive me?”

I put my hands on top of his, enjoying the warmth. I closed my eyes, remembering how cold the darkness felt, but how warm it got when I heard his voice. I opened my eyes, his eyes pleading, searching mine. “I forgive you. Besides, you’re my spark. I can’t get rid of you,” I said smiling at him again, enjoying the thought of extra angels on standby in that moment.

He raised an eyebrow at me, but instead of asking what I meant, he just leaned forward and kissed me. He was gentle, at first. His hands still on each side of my face. I pressed my body against him, timidly, and wrapped my arms around his neck. I deepened the kiss, feeling his body relaxing from the stress he’d been under for the past how ever many days.

“I love you, solnishko,” he said, pressing his forehead to mine. “I will spend every day of the rest of my life trying to make sure you know that and how sorry I am.”

I kissed his lips once more. “Don’t hang on to this. Don’t keep beating yourself up. You made a mistake. I mean, a big one, but I’m still here. I’ve got a 100% success rate at surviving hor rible situations so far. But I have been thinking that we should get a whiteboard or something that says, ‘it’s been this many days since Sephie got seriously hurt. That way we can keep track. You know, data is king and what not.”

His smile stretched across his face. “There’s my Sephie.”

Chapter Eighty

Adrik

I can't even begin to describe the relief I felt when she woke up this time. I had my Sephie back. I would've given anything to see her smile again.

"How long have I been asleep this time? I know you laid here for at least twelve hours without moving, just so I could sleep peacefully," she said, her fingers still running over my facial hair, her unique eyes taking inventory of my face like she still wasn't sure I was really here with her.

"How do you know that, Sephie?" I raised an eyebrow at her.

She started to say something, but then stopped herself. "Um, it doesn't matter right now. How long have I been torturing you?"

I smiled at her. My hand slid up the back of her neck, pulling her to me. I kissed her lips gently. "It wasn't torture, solnishko. I was happy that you needed me when you were sleeping. Especially since you didn't want anything to do with me when you were awake. It was killing me."

"I was still mad at you," she said, shrugging her shoulders.

I chuckled. "You have every right to be mad at me. I fu cked up."

"And then I made you lay here with no food or water for days. Consider your penance complete," she said, grinning at me.

"It wasn't days. The second day isn't over yet. You've been out for a little over 24 hours this time." I ran my hands through her hair, as she closed her eyes. Her hands went to my shoulders to steady herself. I loved watching her get lost in my touch. She had no idea how sexy she looked.

Her eyes snapped open, "weren't we supposed to leave though? What happened?"

I smiled at her. "The guys all came to me yesterday morning when we were supposed to leave and told me they weren't going anywhere until you were better. I had already made the decision to stay until you were better but hadn't told them as I couldn't leave you. They discussed it among themselves and said they weren't going until you could go too." Her eyebrows furrowed for a moment. I cupped her cheek with my hand, my thumb gently stroking her beautiful face. "They love you, Sephie. They're fairing almost worse than I have been. At least I've been able to hold you while you were sleeping. I don't think any of them have slept since we got here. They come in occasionally to check on you. They look terrible."

She groaned. "Part of me wants to make them suffer for a few more days, but I should let them all know they're also forgiven. There is a grander plan in play here." She pouted, then grinned at me.

God, I've missed her.

She rested her head on my shoulder for a few minutes. I rubbed her back lightly, trying to avoid hurting her. She had road rash over almost her entire body from hitting the ground and rolling. She had to be in tremendous pain.

She sighed, sitting up to look at me again. "I need a shower," she said climbing off my lap slowly. I didn't move, as I still wasn't sure how much she wanted me close to her. I was going to let her have privacy.

She stopped at the bathroom door and turned back to look at me. "I need help."

I jumped off the bed and was next to her immediately. She was laughing at my exuberance, but I didn't care. I was so happy that she wanted me near her again that I would do whatever she asked me to.

She asked me to help her with the bandage on her hip before she got in the shower. Since she'd been sleeping for a day, she hadn't taken her antibiotics. I'd completely forgotten about them. The wound looked red and angry. It looked painful. She held her breath as I tried to peel the bandage off as gently as I could. A single tear ran down her cheek. I knew it hurt.

"Since you've been sleeping, you haven't taken an antibiotic. You need to do that when we get done. Do you want to try a pain pill? I don't want you to be in pain, my love."

"I'll take the antibiotic, but I don't know about the pain pill. Maybe half of one? I hurt, but I also don't want to go through what the other pain pills did to me again."

I pulled her to me, careful of the wound on her hip, and held her close. I rested my chin on the top of her head, my eyes closed. I was relishing having her in my arms again, but I felt so guilty still. She almost died because of me. "I'm so sorry, solnishko."

I felt her rest her hands on my chest. "If you haven't figured it out yet, I'm apparently difficult to ki ll. I'll heal. I can manage in the meantime."

I laughed. She was so unpredictable. One of the many things I adored about her.

We walked slowly to the kitchen. I offered to carry her, but she said she needed to move her stiff body, or it would get worse. I couldn't argue with her logic. So, I settled for letting her lean on my arm as she walked. She had a pronounced limp because of her hip. She had deep bruises, along with the wounds. How she didn't break anything, I'll never understand.

Misha was in the kitchen when we walked in. His face brightened seeing Sephie not only awake but also allowing me to help her. She stopped and opened her arms to him. He rushed to her, but I stopped him with a hand to his chest before he could grab her. "Gentle, Misha."

He nodded and gently leaned down to hug her, like she was a live porcelain doll. "I'm so happy to see you, gazelle."

"Ugh, worst hug ever. We need a do-over once I'm better," she smiled at him.

His wide smile spread across his face. "Deal."

She looked to me and cleared her throat. "Can I have a moment alone with Misha?"

I raised an eyebrow but nodded. I went to step away, but she pulled me back and kissed me gently. "I just need a minute," she said, looking at me with that spark that only I could see.

I smiled at her, stepping out of the kitchen. The kitchen opened to a large living room area that then opened onto the back patio. The weather was pleasant, which meant that the large sliding doors could be opened, giving the house an open-air feel. Viktor and Andrei were outside on the patio. They both looked surprised to see me up, especially without Sephie.

"Everything okay, boss?" Andrei asked, concern evident on his face.

I nodded. "She's awake. She's inside with Misha. She asked for a moment alone with him."

Viktor, also concerned, asked, "how…is she?"

"In pain, but she somehow found the strength to forgive me. She did say that she wished she could make you all suffer a little longer, but she's not going to," I said smirking at them.

Both looked shocked. And relieved. But mostly shocked.

"Is she, uh, still angry?" Andrei asked, crossing his legs, probably remembering her knee in his groin.

Chapter Eighty-One

Adrik

Misha walked outside. His face was red and his eyes were misty, but he looked better than he had since the ball. I raised my eyebrow at him. He put his hand on my shoulder, "she's asking for you."

"You good, kid?" I asked.

"Yeah, Boss. Better than good. I don't know how she does it, but she always knows exactly what to say."

I put my hand on his shoulder with a knowing look. I walked inside to find her getting a glass of water in the kitchen. She drank half of it and handed the glass to me. I finished it and refilled it, handing it back to her. I went to grab her antibiotic and gave her one. She swallowed it easily. "What do you think about a pain pill? I can tell you're hurting. Maybe half? It will at least help to take the edge off the pain, maybe?"

She thought for a moment. "Do you think they have just regular ibuprofen here? I know that won't knock me out and it'll take the pain away. That's all I took for my back."

I cursed under my breath. "Really? That's all you took?"

She nodded and shrugged her shoulders. "It worked. It should work on this too."

I called for Misha and asked him to find Isabella to ask if they had ibuprofen. It would be time for dinner soon, so she had to be around close.

He wasn't gone long and he came back with a full bottle of ibuprofen. He handed it to me as she said, "see, Misha, this is why you're my favorite. Don't tell the others." He smiled widely at her.

I opened the bottle. "How many do you want?"

She took the bottle from me and read over the label. It was all in Italian, but she found whatever answer she needed. "Four. In eight hours, four more. I call it 'superprofen," she grinned, popping them in her mo uth.

Ivan walked into the kitchen, looking worse than I'd ever seen him. He stopped, surprised to see Sephie awake and upright. She looked at him, her eyes wide at his state. She looked to me quickly, glancing toward the patio. I knew she wanted a moment alone with Ivan, so I turned to Misha and motioned for him to follow me to the patio.

We were on the patio longer for Ivan than Misha. Viktor and Andrei were reluctant to go to her. They still felt so awful about everything that happened that they weren't sure how to approach her. I couldn't blame them. I would be scared if I were them, too. Truthfully, I was still nervous for Andrei's ba lls and his future ability to have children.

I was starting to worry about Ivan's well-being when Sephie walked out to the patio, leaning on Ivan's arm. His face was also red, his eyes misty. Two down, three to go.

Viktor was the first to make a move when he saw Sephie. He stood up and went to her. Ivan made sure she was stable on her feet and walked away. They were still far enough away that we were mostly out of ear shot.-Viktor always towered over her, but he looked so defeated standing in front of her that he appeared shorter. Smaller. We were trying to give them privacy, but we couldn't help but watch the scene unfold. We saw his shoulders crumble in a single sob

and her comparatively small arms reach up and wrap around his massive shoulders.

Ivan broke our silence. "I don't know how she does it, but she always knows exactly what to say."

I knew exactly how he felt.

Viktor walked back to us after a few more moments with Sephie. He looked at Andrei, who looked terrified. We heard Sephie say loud enough for everyone to hear, "Bubba if you don't get over here right now, I'll make doubly sure you aren't able to have children."

His face went wh ite as he stood up slowly and walked toward heri

"Where's Stephen? He might as well get this over with as well♫" I asked.

"He went to try to get some sleep. None of us have been able to sleep much since we got here. He said he was going to try one more time."

I looked back toward Andrei, who looked like he had been sent to the principal's office. It was much the same scene as with Viktor. She said exactly what he needed to hear to save him from himself. He held onto her gently, but still like she was his anchor in the storm of his own sea of emotions.

Andrei turned back toward us, letting Sephie lean on him as they walked toward us. Her eyes found mine. That spark was back as she walked slowly toward me. I felt my heart threaten to stop as she smiled at me. She tucked herself into my arms. She still felt more fragile to me. Like she was apprehensive. I hoped it was because she was in pain and not anything else.

She looked up at me, "so what's the plan now? Don't we need to leave?"

Ivan spoke first. "It can wait until you're ready to travel. We still have eyes on Anthony and Lorenzo. Everything is still fine until you can make the trip."

"What does the trip consist of?" she asked.

"We had originally planned on riding bikes to Naples. Now, we're thinking we should take a different vehicle. It'll just slow us down," he said.

She thought for a moment, leaning against me. "How long is the trip?"

"Bikes, we should be able to make it in 7 hours or less. Cars, 8 hours or more."

"I can probably do that. As long as I can take the superprofen first."

Ivan raised his eyebrows. "Superprofen?"

"She took a high dose of ibuprofen instead of a pain pill. She said that's all she took with her back and it worked. No ill side effects either," I said.

Ivan cursed under his breath. "Really? That's all you took?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I guess I'm a weirdo, but it works. Whatever lets me fu cking eat again, I'll gladly do."

As if her stomach was waiting to be invited to the conversation, it growled loudly. Everyone laughed. Andrei ran into the kitchen and came back with a partial loaf of bread from earlier in the day.

"Here, spider monkey, this will tide you over until dinner."

"Bubba. Let's get married in Naples. I'm tired of waiting," she said ripping a huge piece off the chunk of bread and shoving it into her mo uth.

She handed the bread to me, knowing I was likely just as hungry as she was. She was right. Between us both, we finished it quickly.

Viktor asked, "you think you can do the car?"

She shook her head. "No, that's not what I meant. I can do the bikes with the superprofen." They all looked at her, surprised.

"What? This sh it works."

Laughing, I kissed her temple.

God, we all missed her.

She spent almost the entire dinner convincing the guys that she'd be able to travel the next day. They were willing to wait a couple more days until she was better.

"Once we get to Naples, what's the plan?" she asked, in between bites of food.

"Armando is meeting us there. We'll spend a couple days there before going on to Sicily," Viktor said.

"See. I can rest there after the trip. It'll be fine," she said. "You guys all need to sleep since I'm apparently the only one that's done that lately. We can leave like lunch time tomorrow and still get to Naples before it gets dark tomorrow."

They thought about her suggestion for a few moments. I had to admit, it wasn't a bad plan. I could use some extra sleep right now, as could everyone else, including her. She could time her superprofen to where she could take it before we left and then she'd be able to take it soon after we arrived in Naples. If she said she'd be up for the trip, I wasn't going to argue with her. She was, after all, apparently difficult to k ill.

Ivan looked at her, a serious expression on his face. "If it becomes too much, you tell me. We'll stop for the night before reaching Naples."

"I will tell you if it becomes too much. I promise," she said.

As we were finishing dinner, Stephen appeared in the kitchen, looking just as ho rrible as everyone else had and not at all rested. The guys all saw him before he saw Sephie. We all quickly walked outside to give them their moment alone, without him even realizing she was up yet.

Once we were outside, Misha spoke up. "That was kinda mean, but I would've loved to have seen his face when he realized he was alone with her."

It didn't take long and we heard her yell, "it's safe. You can come back in."

We filed back into the kitchen. Stephen's face was red, but he looked relieved. He looked at all of us as we walked in.

nupici Ligny-one

"You guys are as sholes. I nearly sh it myself."

We all grinned at him. Sephie said, "you're lucky I'm slow right now or I would've tested that."

Laughter erupted in the kitchen. Everyone needed that little bit of comic relief. I looked at everyone as we laughed and they continued to tease Stephen. They were all going to sleep well tonight now that they knew she was back and they were forgiven. I felt that pull in my chest toward her as I watched her bring light back to every one of them. I hadn't realized how much her light shone on each one of them until it was gone briefly. My breath caught as I looked to her, finding her eyes on me and her smile wide across her face.

God, we all missed her, but me most of all

Chapter Eighty-Two

Sephie

We all woke much later than normal the next morning. I spent time walking around the house and the patio behind the house, trying to loosen up my still sore body. Adrik stayed by my side the entire time. I could walk by myself, but it was easier if I could lean on someone. He wouldn't let me take a step without him there. Always there. Always ready to help me.

By mid-morning, everyone was awake. Isabella had left some food out for us, since none of us had made it to breakfast. We were all picking at the food while getting organized to leave in a few hours. Six motorcycles showed up in pairs, Andrei and Viktor moving them from their storage spot to the house. I had to admit, I was slightly nervous about how I was going to feel by the end of the day, but I had spent so much time last night convincing everyone I would be okay that I couldn't go back now.

Misha walked up to us, carrying a leather jacket in one hand. He handed it to me, "here, gazelle, this is yours. Make sure it fits."

I took the jacket from him, realizing it was a motorcycle jacket, with extra protection and reinforcements built into it. Where was this thing a few nights ago…?

It fit like a glove. I looked up to see Adrik's eyes filled with lust as he watched me. I knew he was struggling. He wanted so badly to hold me tightly, to kiss me with every bit of passion he could muster, but I was so bruised and battered that he had to be gentle with me.

As I slipped out of the jacket and handed it back to Misha, I whispered to Adrik, "we might need a bike when we get home just so I can wear that more often." I winked at him as his cheeks flushed.

Everything was packed up and divided between backpacks that the five guys had. They somehow managed to also fit my few things and Adrik's into their packs, so I wouldn't have to wear one. I was both grateful and impressed with their packing abilities.

I pulled my hair into a low ponytail to get it out of the way of the helmet. Viktor saw me and walked over to me. "You will regret this later, sestrichka," he said, pulling on my ponytail elastic. I looked at Adrik, confused. Viktor just silently started to braid my hair for me. When he was done, I turned to look at him, shocked that my giant Russian bear knew how to braid. He shrugged his shoulders. "I used to have long hair. You would've never been able to get the knots out of your hair by the time we get there."

I opened my arms to him. "Come on. Bring it in." I kissed his cheek when he bent down to hug me gently.

Adrik walked up to me, inspecting Viktor's handiwork after Viktor had walked away. He was looking at me, but he was also lost in a memory. I knew he was thinking back to the night we met. His finger lightly trailed down the side of my face and my neck, his blue eyes taking in every detail of me. His fingers gently lifted my chin, and his lips were on mine. He was still holding back, afraid he would hurt me still, but I still closed my eyes and enjoyed his touch.

"You took your antibiotic and your superprofen, solnishko?"

I nodded. "An hour ago. It's kicking in already. I feel a little better."

"Good. You should be able to take it again when we get there." He kissed me one more time and handed me my helmet. He climbed on the bike and looked toward me. I didn't see Ivan walk up while I was putting on my helmet. I just felt his hands under my arms as he lifted me up and set me on the bike. I grinned; thankful I didn't have to try to step onto the bike with my hip. I signed a "thank you" to him as he walked to his bike.

Adrik sat up, pulling my arm around him. I heard him in my helmet, "you hold on as tight as you need to, solnishko."

"Wait, I can hear you in my helmet. Are we psychic now? Did that just happen?"

I heard Misha laughing in my helmet too. "Gazelle, they're all connected so we can talk to each other."

"Wait, I can hear all of you? Dam mit. That means I can't talk sh it about you guys to Adrik the whole way. That's it. I'm not going."

More laughter. Ivan spoke up. "Remember you promised to tell me if this is too much, princess. I'm holding you to that. We'll have to stop a few times anyway, but if you need to stop more, tell me."

"I promise, Grumplestiltskin." I felt Adrik's arm on top of mine, his fingers laced through mine. We started to move, and he leaned down, pulling me with him. We pulled out of the driveway, Ivan and Viktor in front, Misha beside us, and Stephen and Andrei behind. Misha looked over, pointed to me, and gave me a questioning thumbs up after a few miles. I nodded my head as he pumped his fist once in the air. I smiled and shook my head.

I spent most of the ride enjoying the scenery as we sped through the countryside. I couldn't see over Adrik's body to see how fast we were going, but we weren't taking a leisurely ride, for sure. We would weave in and out of traffic effortlessly as we passed through small towns. We would only slow down as we entered small towns where people were walking on the side of the road. We had to wait for one man to get his go ats across the road.

As soon as we left the towns, it was back to pushing the upper limits of the bikes. I held on tightly to Adrik anytime we accelerated. He would feel me squeeze tighter and would place his arm over mine, lacing his fingers through mine.

We finally made it to a larger city and stopped for gas. It had been a few hours and I was happy to be able to stand up for a minute. Before I could even attempt to get off the bike on my own, Misha had jumped off his bike and was lifting me off. He set me down gently, making sure I was steady on my feet before he took his helmet off.

There were a few customers trying not to stare, but very obviously staring at our little group. There was a car full of what looked like college-aged girls. Their jaws dropped when Misha took his helmet off. He hadn't noticed as he was busy filling the gas tank on his bike. I walked to his side and asked quietly, "are we coming back this way when everything is done?"

"Maybe? We haven't decided. We might leave from Naples. Why?" He looked puzzled.

I discreetly nodded my head in the direction of the car full of girls. "Because you can have an Italian baby in about nine months if you want one."

He was still looking at me but cut his eyes toward the car full of girls. His wide smile stretching across his face. He ran his hand through his hair. I heard not so quiet exclamations from the group. "You could have all of them, without even trying." I said as I winked at him, walking back to Adrik.

He had left his helmet on but took it off when he saw me coming toward him. More exclamations from the group of girls. While I was more than willing to be a wingman for Misha, they were lusting after the wrong one when it came to

Adrik. I glanced in their direction to make sure they were watching as I walked to him, wrapping my arms around him, and kissing him. He smiled against my lips, "did you just pu blicly claim me, solnishko?"

"Da mn straight I did," I said with my best devilish grin.

He kissed me once more. "You're allowed to pub licly claim me anytime you feel the need, my love."

Chapter Eighty-Three

Sephie

We all made a pit stop, with Adrik waiting outside the restroom for me. As I was washing my hands, one of the girls walked into the bathroom. She spoke to me in Italian, but I shook my head no.

“English?” I asked.

She continued in English, “how do you have so many attractive men with you?”

Without even thinking, I looked at her as seriously as I could, “I’m a movie star. They’re my bodyguards. I can’t believe you don’t recognize me.” I smiled to myself as I left her stunned in the bathroom. I was still smiling when I walked out of the bathroom.

Adrik looked at me, smiling back at me, looking especially handsome in his leather jacket.

“Why are you smiling so big, solnishko?” he asked as he wrapped his arm around my waist to help me walk back to the bikes.

The more I walked, the easier it got, but I was still grateful for the help.

“I’m now a movie star and you guys are my bodyguards.”

“Remind me to get your autograph later.” He kissed the top of my head, chuckling.

Before we left, the car full of girls pulled out ahead of us, turning in the same direction we were going. I was sure we were going to catch up to them quickly. I put my helmet on and Misha was there to pick me up, putting me on the bike once again. I wrapped my arms around Adrik’s waist.

We’re going to need to do this more often when we get home.

It didn’t take very long, and we caught up to the car full of girls. Viktor and Ivan pulled beside them, both waving at the girls. Adrik and Misha doing the same. I looked back and Andrei and Stephen had done the same. The girls were so embarrassed that they could hardly look as we passed.

“They’re going to remember this day for the rest of their lives, gentlemen. You guys just shaped their future love interests,” I laughed as we sped away from them. I heard laughter from everyone in my helmet.

“We should be coming into Rome in the next few minutes,” Ivan said. “We’re making better time than I thought we would be. You’re a fuc king beast, princess.”

“I don’t know about all that. I’m literally just sitting here hanging on to the man I love. This doesn’t feel like a lot of effort on my part.”

Adrik reached back and grabbed my leg, pulling me closer to him. I squeezed his waist a little tighter.

Traffic got heavier as we got closer to Rome, forcing us to slow down. We could split the lane with cars, allowing us to jump ahead of slower traffic. I’ve never seen so many cars in the same place. Driving through Rome was chaos, yet everyone seemed to stay out of the way of other cars. I found myself gasping a few times thinking that one of us was going to be hit, but it never happened. Each time I would flinch, Adrik would squeeze my hand or would talk to me, assuring me it would be okay.

The other guys figured out I was nervous and started talking to me as well, telling me stories to take my mind off the traffic or telling me how much longer we had until we were through the city. I could feel the anxiety coming on. I didn’t think I would be able to ignore it.

“Once we get through this clusterfuck, I’m gonna need a minute, if that’s okay,” I said. I could feel my legs starting to shake a little.

Ivan asked, “do you need to stop now? We can pull over right now if you need it.”

“No, no. I want to get out of this place first. It’s making me anxious,”

“You got it, princess,” he said as he accelerated through traffic)

Andrei said, “close your eyes, spider monkey. It’s easier for you and we can get you out of here faster.”

I gave him the thumbs up sign, as he was right behind us. I sh ut my eyes tight and held onto Adrik. I felt his hand on my leg again briefly. He put both hands back on the bike as we started to weave through traffic faster. My breaths were coming faster, as my body started to shake a little more with each je rk of the bike.

“Three minutes, princess.”

That three minutes took forever. My legs were shaking, and I felt like I couldn’t catch my breath. We stopped and Misha was pulling me off the bike immediately. Adrik ripped his helmet off as he climbed off the bike, he pulled my helmet off and crushed me to him. His hands running up and down my back, trying to calm my panic.

“Shhh…it’s okay now. We’re out of the city now. It’ll be smooth from here.”

I nodded, my head against his chest. “I’m okay. I just need a minute.”

I heard Ivan say behind me, “you can have as long as you need, princess. Nobody likes driving through Rome.”

Adrik’s hands continued to rub my back, occasionally running over my hair. The longer I stood in his embrace, breathing in his scent, the more relaxed I got. I didn’t know what it was about his touch that could calm me down, but I hoped it never went away.

I took a deep breath in.

“Better?” he asked, stepping back to look at me, his face full of concern.

I nodded my head. “Sorry. I don’t know what came over me.”

“It doesn’t matter. You’ve been through a lot lately. Rome is…a lot, even for someone who hasn’t been through even a fraction of what you have,” he said, tucking a stray curl behind my ear.

I leaned against him again, resting my head on his chest. His arms felt so nice around me that I didn’t want to give up that moment just yet. I had a memory of the coldness of the void. Cold that penetrated down to my bones, down to my very soul. I closed my eyes, thinking about how his voice brought warmth back. A small smile came to my lips, thinking about how much I needed him. How he was always ready to do anything I needed. How they all were. I really was the Juckiest girl.

“Okay, I’m ready. We can go again. I don’t want to make us late.”

“You’re sure? We can stay here a little longer,” Adrik said, looking in my eyes, searching.

“I’m positive. I’m okay. Promise.” I stood on my toes and kissed him gently.

He nodded, putting his helmet back on. He climbed on the bike. Ivan was next to me, as I was putting my helmet on. He caught my elbow as I raised the helmet to put it on. He looked me in the eyes, seriously, “You did good. You tell me if it comes back, okay? We’ll stop again. We’re well ahead of schedule. We can afford to stop as much as you need.”

I pulled the helmet over my head and tapped it. He chuckled as he lifted me onto the bike

Chapter Eighty-Four

Sephie

Outside of Rome were more small towns, which I could easily handle. We stopped one more time before we got closer to Naples, just without the car full of fan girls this time.

“This stop was boring. I like it better when you guys have fans,” I said as we pulled away from the station. “Nobody tell Tori I said that.”

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Andrei sighed. “That might not be a problem when we get back.”

“Bubba! What happened now?”

“I couldn’t tell her we were leaving. I ditched my phone before we got on the plane. No contact until this is done. I doubt she’ll be waiting for me.”

“Oh, Bubba. I didn’t even think about that.” I couldn’t help but think back to my own anger at the situation. I didn’t mean to, but I laughed. “She’s gonna be SO pissed.”

Stephen spoke up. “We’re all more scared of her than we are of you, if that gives you an idea of what he’s dealing with.”

“Shut up.”

“No, it’s true, gazelle,” Misha said. “She gets angry at the slightest thing. It’s like we can’t say anything around her. I mean, you had a very good reason to be angry with us. But she gets mad at us for stupid stuff.”

Andrei said, “she doesn’t have the same confidence that you do, spider monkey. She tends to see the negative before she sees the positive. It’s exhausting.”

“Bubba, I’m sorry. I feel bad for facilitating this relationship. Max never keeps girls longer than a few weeks, so I don’t vet them thoroughly enough, apparently.”

“Don’t apologize, Sephie. Whatever happens will happen,” Andrei said. I could hear the sadness in his voice.

“Well, if it doesn’t work out with her, I promise to vet the next one thoroughly before I give her my blessing,” I said.

“We have to get your blessing now?” Ivan asked.

“Um, yes. I can’t believe you would even question that, Grumplestiltskin.” I fired back. I was sure he was going to argue with me after saying that.

“You realize you’ve set a next to impossible standard for other women to live up to, right? You honestly expect us to be able to find someone that can pass that test?” he said.

“Ivan the Squishy has entered the chat, gentlemen.” I heard laughter from everyone, then Viktor spoke up. “He’s right, you know. You’ve made it infinitely harder for us to find a suitable woman now.”

I was silent for a moment, trying to think of what to say. I started to say something a few times but changed my mind and shut my mouth. I felt Adrik’s hand on mine, his fingers laced through mine. “It’s not her fault she’s amazing, guys. Nor should you be discouraged that she set the bar higher for you. Trust me, it’ll be worth the wait,” he said. I squeezed him tighter, resting my head on the back of his shoulder. I quickly got lost in my own thoughts, thinking about how easily I had formed a unique bond with each of them. Wondering if another woman could ever do the same or if I really was ruining their chances of ever finding their own person.

I thought back to the conversation I had with my dad and how what had happened was needed, not just for me, but for all of them as well. I could easily see how it was needed for Misha. The guys now gave credit to his gut feeling, which would likely come in handy in the future. I was going to have to wait to see how things played out to understand why Andrei was going through this with Tori. Not to mention what the other three gained from this whole experience. I spent the remainder of the trip lost in my thoughts.

Adrik

Sephie had been quiet for the last part of the trip. I kept checking on her, either grabbing her hand or her leg. Each time, she would squeeze me just a little tighter. I was worried she was starting to feel pain, as it was close to time for more superprofen. I was anxious to get to Armando’s villa so she could take more and rest for the remainder of the evening.

As we got closer to the villa, I found myself thinking back to our first stop that day. When Sephie had made sure the girls that were eyeing Misha knew that I was off the table. I’ve never been publicly claimed before. I can’t say I disliked it, either. I know I want to make sure that every man knows she’s mine anytime we’re in public. I’m so relieved that she’s forgiven me and still wants me after what happened. I was so sure I had lost her. I had no idea how I was going to live without her. I was so grateful I wouldn’t have to figure out how to.

It was like she was reading my mind, because Sephie tightened her grip around me, breaking me free from my thoughts of what almost happened. I found her hand, against my stomach, lacing my fingers through hers. Her hands were starting to get cold, as the sun was getting lower in the sky. We still had about half an hour before we reached the villa. I unzipped my jacket halfway and stuck her hands inside my jacket, hoping to keep them warm until we could stop.

The early fall air had a bite to it that we weren’t yet used to. As we got closer to the coast, we could smell the sea air and feel the breeze pick up. I was hoping they would have a bath I could run for her once we got there. It would help with her soreness, warming her up in the process. I was looking forward to at least one calm day once we arrived.

I’d been so worried about Sephie that I hadn’t thought much about the situation with Anthony and Lorenzo. I was so close to wanting them all dead. I just wanted to be done with it at this point. Lorenzo was looking for a way back to the city. He felt Anthony was his ticket to come back, even though Anthony was also banished. They were using Salvadori to stir the pot, trying to create enough chaos that they could sneak back in without me noticing. Once there, they would take over. Their plan was to unleash hell on the people of the city, causing as much mayhem as possible. With the city a war zone, it would be easier to get to me and the other three bosses that stood loyal to me.

Chapter Eighty-Five

Adrik

The only thing working in our favor right now was that they didn't know for sure I had survived their assassination attempt. Armando's men had staged an "escape" with Sephie and now Salvadori's men were looking for her in the city. Before we left, I fortified the penthouse, making sure Ms. Jackson and Mr. Turner would be safe. I put extra guards to watch them.

We had given the diamond bracelet that Salvadori had gifted Sephie to Armando's men that had gotten their as ses kicked when they tried to kidnap her. They were to take the bracelet and lead Salvadori's men on a wild goose chase, to keep them busy while we were simultaneously taking care of Anthony and Lorenzo. It would make the story of her "escape" more plausible if they had hits off that bracelet periodically. We had taken it to the ball with us. The guys would pass it to each other throughout the night, to pick up different conversations. Before I went on stage, Viktor handed it off to Armando's men so they could "record" her kidnapping. Now, they had Salvadori under the impression that she had gotten away from them and they were after her, which freed us up to take care of Anthony and Lorenzo.

This was all dependent, of course, on whether plans were still the same on their end or not. Armando had been keeping a very close eye on both Anthony and Lorenzo. He regularly spent time in Naples, so it wasn't unusual for him to be here. We hadn't spoken to him since before the ball, however. I wasn't sure how much he knew about what happened to Sephie, as he wasn't in contact with his men to protect their cover.

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As I thought about everything happening, I found myself just wanting it to be over with already. I wanted to take Sephie home. I didn't care about anything else at this point. I wanted her to be better and I wanted to spend my days trying to love her the way she deserved.

This was in stark contrast to my younger years. Before I took over for my father, he used me as an enforcer, of sorts. Once I was given a target, I wouldn't stop until I ended that person. When Viktor first started working for me, we had a few very close calls where we almost didn't make it out alive. I was young and reckless. He wasn't much older, but he'd had much more training than I had. He was more disciplined. He taught me everything he knew and saved my life in the process.

Ivan came along almost two years later, completely by chance. We had been after a former boss that had stolen from my father. He had fled to the countryside, where he controlled all the roads that led to his compound. The only way in was by air. Ivan was our helicopter pilot. His skills are what got us in and out of that situation alive. I gave him a job the same day.

Andrei came later, then Misha, and Stephen was the last one to join the group. They all had special skills to offer that made the whole stronger. They'd all been with me for years, at this point, and I trusted them with my life. I trusted their opinion and especially their instincts.

I was pulled from my thoughts as we neared the villa. We slawed and turned down the gravel drive. We were greeted by Armando's staff when we arrived. They showed us to our rooms where we could change and freshen up. Armando would meet us for dinner later. Sephie's teeth were chattering by the time we got there, so I was glad to be off the bike for the day. Although I can't say I hated having her arms around me the entire day. We would definitely need to get bikes once we got back home.

I grabbed our things from the guys and closed the door behind me. Sephie was looking around the room, her arms folded tightly across her chest, trying to stay warm. I checked the bathroom and luckily, there was a large bathtub. I turned the hot water on. The house staff had left some waters for us, so I grabbed that and her antibiotics and superprofen.

"Here, solnishko." She took the pills and the water, swallowing them quickly. She drank half the bottle of water and handed me the rest. I finished it quickly. I pulled her to me, my hands gently lilting her shirt over her head. "Come, I ran a bath so you can warm up. You're freezing."

I unzipped her jeans and started to push them down. She flinched, so I stopped. "You better do that. I don't want to hurt you." She slowly shimmied out of her jeans, trying to avoid the bandage on her hip. "We should change that too," I said nodding to her bandage. She just nodded as she continued to discard her clothes. She was completely na ked in front of me, her arms still folded across her, like she was shy. Almost like she was ashamed for me to look at her. She wouldn't look at me, choosing to look at the floor instead.

I lifted her chin, forcing her to look at me. "Even with all your wounds, you're still the most beautiful woman I've ever seen." I kissed her gently. Grabbing her hand, I walked her to the bath and helped her get in. The water was hot, so she relaxed almost immediately when she sat down. She leaned against the tub, resting her head on the side.

I stood above her for a few moments, just enjoying the look of peace on her face. Never before in my life had I gotten so much satisfaction out of making someone else happy. It's like my sole purpose in life had become to make her happy. I took a deep breath, lost in my thoughts about how different she was and how different I was with her. She didn't even open her eyes. She just asked, "are you getting in too or are you just going to stand there and stare at me the whole time?" A small smile spread across her face.

She heard my clothes hit the floor and she sat up so I could climb in the tub behind her, leaning back against me once I sat down. I wrapped my arms around her. She moaned quietly. "Now it's warm enough." She still had her eyes closed, her head leaning against my shoulder.

"How are you feeling? Are you in pain?" I asked, my hands running lightly over her arms under the water.

"It's not too bad. I can manage. I'm more sore than anything."

I took one of her arms in mine, trying to be mindful of her cuts and scrapes, and started massaging where I could. After a few minutes, I moved to the other arm. I felt her relax against me, silently enjoying my touch. I massaged every place I could on her until the water started to cool.

"I should get you out of here before you get cold again. That's not going to help your sore muscles." I made a slight move to have her sit up so I could get out. She didn't move her body, she just looked up at me, with that small smile on her face still.

"I love you, you know," she said, taking my hands and wrapping my arms around her again.

I felt a warmth over my body like I had never felt before. It was like this was the first time she had told me she loved me. Or the first time I believed her, maybe. Either way, I held her against me like I was going to lose her for a few moments. She didn't complain, she just kept her arms tight around mine. I kissed her cheek, my lips next to her ear, I said, "I love you, solnishko. More than anything."

Chapter Eighty-Six

Adrik

I was looking forward to seeing Armando again. He was always a pleasant man. Honest, ton. He came to me straight away after Salvadori had approached him. Sephie liked him best out of all the bosses, too. She said he was always the most respectful of her. A few times he had even helped her clean up after the meeting was over. She had a feeling it was because he wanted to set her up with one of his sons, but the appreciated the help anyway. She did say his sons were the least obnoxious of all the bosses' children.

He was closer in age to me than he was to the other bosses. Maybe that's why he felt more loyal to me. He was instrumental in helping to sway the people's opinions of my organization. He said he didn't see a need for violence when keeping the peace was so much easier.

Most importantly, I asked Sephie what his tell was before we went to dinner. She thought for a moment, as she was getting dressed. I enjoyed watching her lost in thought, still half na ked in front of me. She pulled her shirt over her head, slowly. "He doesn't have one. He's the only one. Maybe that's why I always liked him. I always thought he was honest and genuine. Like you are."

"You're sure he doesn't have one?"

*I'm sure, but I'll pay attention at dinner to make sure I just haven't forgotten something. My brain isn't exactly operating at peak performance right now."

"You do seem better since you started taking the ibuprofen, though. We should've done that after you were attacked instead of those pain pills."

"Yeah, I don't know why I couldn't think of it then. Guess I hit my head harder than I thought."

I frowned, thinking about the abuse this poor woman had taken over the last few years. She was so flippant about it sometimes, but she had survived very serious situations that any of us would've struggled to get through. And she was smiling and telling jokes through it all.

She caught me frowning and walked the few steps toward me. She still had a limp, but it was better when the superprofen was fresh. She started to button my shirt, leaving the top two open how I liked. She placed her hands on my chest and stood on her toes to kiss me. I wanted to pull her to me. I wanted to kiss her passionately. I wanted to skip dinner and lock ourselves in this room. As if she knew what I was thinking, her hands grabbed mine and she wrapped my arms around her waist. "It doesn't hurt when you hold me here," she said, moving her arms around my neck. I pulled her to me, kissing her. I was still timid at first, but she deepened the kiss, giving me permission. I held her tighter, kissing her like she was the air I needed. She moaned softly in my mo uth, her breaths coming quicker. She pressed her body even closer to mine, causing me to groan. I wanted her so badly. She broke the kiss, pressing her forehead to mine, trying to calm herself down.

"We should go now. Or we're not going to leave this room for a few days."

I cursed under my breath but grabbed her hand and turned toward the door, knowing she was completely right.

Armando was waiting for us when we went out for dinner. The guys had already arrived. They were all waiting for us.

Sephie walked in, looking at Armando. "Please forgive us for being late. I'm a little slow right now." She had that smile that could melt hearts of stone on her face as she said it.

"Oh, my dear. You take as long as you need. The guys here told me what happened." His hand went over his mo uth, trying to cover his laughter. "I can't believe you broke my guy's face. He's never going to live that one down."

"Tell him to work on his communication skills next time and that won't happen," she said, folding her arms across her chest. Her smile fading quickly, replaced by a very serious look on her face. She may have forgiven all of us, but she clearly had not forgiven Armando's men.

Armando burst out laughing. "I will personally see to it that he gets that message." He walked to her, offering his hand. She took it. He kissed the back of her hand. "In all seriousness, my dear. How are you? Do you need anything? I hear you've had quite the time the last few days."

She smiled at him once again. "I'm okay. Thank you, though. And thank you for your hospitality. Your house is lovely."

He smiled broadly. "Ah, this house is one of my favorite places. I must show you around after dinner. This is why I spend almost as much time here as I do in the city," he said, winking at her.

"I would love that, thank you."

Afmando looked to me, extending his hand for me to shake. "Boss, I'm honored to have you here, sir. Come, let us feast!" he said, showing us the way. He had a long table outside in the courtyard set up for all of us. His staff waiting to take care of every need.

I glanced to Sephie. The breeze was light, but almost constant. I was worried about her getting cold again. "Do you want a jacket, my love? I can run get you one."

"Yes please," she said, smiling sweetly at me. I excused myself and ran back to our room. When I came back, they were all laughing, and her cheeks were flushed. "What did I miss?" I asked, holding my jacket open for her so she could easily slide her arms in.

Andrei said, "Armando said he had wanted to hook Sephie up with one of his sons, but he didn't believe his sons were smart enough or strong enough to handle her. I told him what she did to all of us on the plane to really drive his point. home."

"A redhead named for the queen of the Underworld is not for the faint of heart, Armando," I said, smiling. "She can walk through he ll unscathed, taming monsters to her will as she goes."

Sephie looked up at me, somewhat surprised at my words. I meant every word. Her eyes were searching mine as I smiled at her with every ounce of love I had for her. Armando glanced between us. "I see now that my attempts to set her up with my son were futile. She was always meant for greater things."

Chapter Eighty-Seven

Sephie

Once we all sat down at the table, Armando's staff started bringing us food. I've never been more excited in my life. I'd been able to eat so little over the past month, I just wanted to eat all the food in front of me. Conversation was optional, as far as I was concerned. I was grateful that the men did most of the talking, allowing me to listen, observe, and most importantly eat.

Adrik was comfortable with Armando. More comfortable than I'd seen him with other bosses. He was tense with other bosses, but not with Armando. Maybe it was their closeness in age that made him more relatable Adrik was still barely 30, compared to Armando's early 40s. Adrik had taken over from his father when he was very young, making it even more impressive that he'd kept order as long as he had. Maybe it was that Armando was just a good human. He was as much a legitimate businessman as he was a mobster. He used the profits from his illegal ventures to fund his legal ones, just like Adrik did. He helped his community, he gave back to the people in his area, and he cared about their well-being. He had strict rules that he lived by, which was admirable.

This situation with Anthony, Lorenzo, and Salvadori bothered Armando deeply. He looked stressed when talking about it with Adrik. He looked bothered by their actions, bothered that the two other bosses had gone to Salvadori's side.

"I can mostly understand Niko siding with Salvadori. He's always been a bit of a snake and only looks out for himself. But I was troubled by Vito siding with them," Armando told Adrik.

"I think they have something over Vito and that's why he went with them," Adrik responded. "Vito has never been very strong-willed. They're likely lying to him about whatever it is, but Vito is easily scared. Therefore, he's easily controlled."

My curiosity was piqued. "Vito is middle-aged, black hair, clean-shaven?"

Armando and Adrik both nodded. Armando added, "he always sat closest to the door at the meetings. He insisted on that spot every time. He's very OCD about these things."

I remembered Vito. "He taps his fingers together, like he's counting, when he's talking and when he's listening. Five taps for good outcomes, three taps for bad outcomes," I said. "When he's especially nervous, he taps continuously with one hand and will obsessively scratch his head with the other."

Adrik smiled at me, knowing I was right, but also knowing it was something that no one else had likely ever noticed. Armando looked at me, surprised. "How do you know this?"

Adrik answered before I could. I happily shoved another forkful of pasta into my mouth. "Her observation skills are next level, Mando. She told me what both Salvadori and Niko do when they're lying. She was 100% correct."

Armando swore under his breath. "I could use your services for my business deals. I've been screwed by a couple of politicians because I found out too late they were lying to me."

Adrik chuckled. "I've threatened to give her a job doing just that."

I cut my eyes over at him, remembering how I responded the last time he brought it up. I raised my eyebrow, wondering if he also remembered. He added, laughing, "she's not sure I can afford her, though." I grinned at him, while chewing my next bite of pasta.

Armando, his eyes slightly wide, added, "I'll pay you whatever you want. You should come to my business meeting in two days. This project is one that will benefit the city, but it needs approval. I have a feeling they're going to try and screw me over once again."

I just looked at Adrik. He looked at me, a question in his eyes. I knew he was wondering if I wanted to do it. I held his gaze but said nothing. It was his decision, as far as I was concerned. I wasn't sure I would be of any real help meeting someone just once anyway. He looked to Armando, "she doesn't go anywhere without me."

Armando nodded eagerly, "of course, of course. Your men will be there too. I can bring you in as a business partner. It's a lucrative deal. But I need to know what their intentions are, otherwise, I'm going to lose money again and I don't want that happening."

Adrik glanced at me once more. I shrugged my shoulders. He glanced at Misha, raising an eyebrow, silently asking for his thoughts. Misha nodded his head, meaning he didn't have a bad feeling about it. Adrik looked to Armando and agreed. I looked at Misha, who had a look of surprise on his face. I winked at him, grinning.

After dinner, I asked Armando to show me around his villa. He was so close to the water you could see the sea from his back patio. I wanted to walk along the beach, but tonight was not the time for that. I felt a moment of sadness at not being able to torture Misha with a run along the beach while we were here.

Adrik was by my side the whole time. He was normally quieter around people outside our little group. I noticed it about him early on. The less he talked, the more others would talk. It's a great strategy to get people to tell you too much. Armando was happy to fill the silence, telling me about his place, what his plans for this city were, as well as back home. He always seemed like such a genuine man, who clearly cared for the people in his city. It was easy to see why the people loved him.

We got back to our room later. I was exhausted from the ride down as well as the walking after dinner. As soon as he closed the bedroom door, I pulled my shirt off and threw it on the floor. "Give me your shirt," I said. He raised his eyebrow, that sexy smirk on his face. "Please?" I added, smiling at him.

He walked toward me, unbuttoning his shirt. He slipped it off as he stood in front of me. He held it out behind me so I could slip my arms in it, then he buttoned it up. "I feel like I'm doing this backwards. I'm supposed to be taking your clothes off, not putting them on."

I ran my hands over his chest. "This was really just a ploy to get you to take your shirt off. If pants didn't hurt to wear right now, I'd make you give me your pants too."

He clicked his tongue. "Are you hurting, solnishko? Did we walk too much after dinner?" He led me to the bed. He unbuttoned my jeans, unzipping them, but then waited for me to carefully slide them over my hip. He pushed me gently onto the bed, carefully pulling them the rest of the way off. He ran his hands lightly over my legs, as he leaned over me. He gently kissed me, his hands in my hair.

I really wish I didn't hurt in every part of my body right

Chapter Eighty-Eight

Sephie

He stopped the kiss. His blue eyes found mine. “You might have to start wearing all my shirts, solnishko. This one might be better than my t-shirt.”

I smiled at him, scooting farther onto the bed so he could get in next to me. He stretched out, opening his arms for me. I laid across his chest, my leg across his. His hands went straight to my hair as I ran my fingers lightly over his chest.

He sighed. “Are you sure you’re okay with going to Armando’s meeting? You don’t have to go if you don’t want to.”

I rested my chin on his chest, looking at his handsome face. “I don’t mind as long as you’re fine with it and you go too. And Misha doesn’t have a bad feeling about it. And….” I giggled. “I’m kidding. That’s enough stipulations. I don’t know if I can really be useful seeing someone for the first time anyway, but I’ll give it a try. I like Armando. I don’t want to see him get screwed over, so if I can help prevent that, I’m happy to do so.”

He looked at me, like he was lost in thought for a moment, his eyes taking in every detail of my face. I watched him, watching me. For a brief moment, I saw the sadness in his eyes. He tried to hide it when he saw that I was watching him. He closed his eyes for a moment, taking in a deep breath. I was still watching him when he opened his eyes. I raised my eyebrow at him.

He sighed. “I’m not sure I will ever get rid of the guilt for what I did to you. You’re such a bright spot in my life, you’re so different from any woman I’ve ever known, and I almost ruined it all in pursuit of vengeance.” He closed his eyes again and leaned his head back.

I didn’t respond right away. I wasn’t sure what to say, honestly. I know what he did came from a good place. A stupid place, maybe, but he didn’t mean for me to get hurt. I knew that without a doubt. He meant for the plan to go off perfectly and for me to find out it was all fake before we left the hotel.

I pulled myself up so I was straddling his hips, so I could see him. He opened his eyes when I moved, sitting up more so he could look at me. I reached out and ran my fingers over his face, causing him to close his eyes again. “Did you mean for me to get hurt?”

His eyes snapped open as he sat up, coming closer to me. His eyes showed shock and maybe fear as he looked at me, wondering why I would ask him that question. I couldn’t help but smile at his reaction. It was exactly what I was expecting.

“Of course not, Sephie. Do you think I could have meant to hurt you?”

I chuckled. “Not in the least. I’ve never doubted that you didn’t mean for me to get hurt. But it illustrates my point.” My fingers went back to his face, trailing down his neck. He stayed sitting up, holding me to him. His eyes searching mine. “You had good intentions when you made the plan. The execution of the plan is where it got all f**ked up, but your intentions were always pure.” I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to decide how to proceed. “I’m not completely blameless in that either. I did the one thing Ivan and Viktor told me to never do in a situation like that. I panicked. If I would’ve stayed calm, that a-hole that took me could’ve explained everything like he was supposed to. Instead, I made that next to impossible. But you never meant for any of that to happen. I remember the anger in your voice when you first saw me on the plane. Some part of me knew it was you, but I was still too scared to believe it. But I remember your anger. Clearly. I’ve seen the pain in your eyes when you look at me, when you look at my body right now. I’ve seen the regret too. I know you never meant for any of that to happen. I know you. I know you love me. I know how good you are.” He dropped his gaze at my last statement. I lifted his chin, so he would look at me again. “You might not believe it, but I know you’re good. How can I not? You sent your personal bodyguards to look after me without a second thought when you barely knew me. You’ve made sure I was safe, always. You’ve given me everything I need. And, most importantly, you’ve given me your heart, even though it almost stops every time I smile at you,” I said smirking at him.

He opened his eyes wider. “How do you know that?”

“Let’s just say a birdie told me,” I said. His face still showed doubt. “Adrik, when you look at me, you see a person who is good and only good, but that’s not really true. When I was out on the plane, I relived that night in the basement with my uncle. It didn’t go exactly how I told you.” It was my turn to look down. I breathed deeply. “I sliced his Achilles tendon, yes, but I had blocked out what came after. He fell to the floor. I stood up, the knife still in my hand.

I stabbed him in the heart and stood over him to watch him die. As he was slowly dying, he reached for my leg, but I just stomped the knife deeper into his chest. I never shed a single tear over him. Even now, I feel zero remorse for that. None. In fact, I’m happy he’s dead. I’m not the saint you think I am. Just like you’re not the demon you think you

are.”

He studied my face for a moment but stayed quiet. I searched his eyes, looking for the change I was always afraid of. He held my gaze like he knew what I was doing. He looked at me with all the love and adoration that he always did. The sadness from earlier was gone, replaced by longing. I couldn’t help but smile when I didn’t find what I was afraid of finding. His hands cupped my face, gently pulling me toward him. His lips found mine. He sucked my bottom lip and bit down lightly on it, causing me to deepen the kiss.

I didn’t care that I was hurt. I needed him. I pressed my body to his, my hips grinding against his. He groaned. “Sephie. I don’t want to hurt you.”

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 89

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Chapter Ninety

Sephie

When Armando said his girlfriend liked to shop, that was an understatement. The room was da mn near an entire shop's worth of clothing. She even had it on racks like it was at a store. I just stared at all the clothes, wondering to myself why anyone would ever need this much. There's no way she could've worn all these clothes in a year. It seemed like a waste.

Once Armando showed us the room, he left us to go through and find what I needed. I looked at Adrik, still somewhat shocked.

"Who needs this many articles of clothing? She could've worn a different outfit every single day and she still wouldn't have worn everything in here in a year."

He was looking at me, somewhat amused by my astonishment. "And this is why you're different, Sephie. I've had girlfriends that have shopped like this in the past. I told you. Most women that date guys like me and Armando are more interested in the money and the power than they are us."

My mou th fell open in shock. "You've had girlfriends that wasted this much money before?"

He looked around the room. "This is nothing. Ask to see her jewelry collection and then let me know how shocked you are.

"And you let them??"

"I thought that's what you were supposed to do. I thought that's what love was for a long time, especially when I was younger. It wasn't until after the guys started working for me and they saw the 'other' side of the women I would date that I started to be able to see them more clearly."

"Okay, one. Sad. Very sad. And two. If I EVER spend this much money on something stu pid like clothes, you should get me to a hospital right away. Like I hit my head again or there were complications from this last time that nobody saw coming. Maybe I had a stroke or something, I don't know. But I'm gonna need medical attention."

He laughed, wrapping his arms around my waist. "Thank you for being you, my love. I fall more in love with you each day."

"Is it because I don't spend thousands of dollars on st upid things like clothes? Because I would love me for that too."

"Among other things," he said, smiling broadly at me.

I was still cursing under my breath at the ridiculousness of the situation before me as I started to look through the veritable clothes shop in Armando's spare room. Adrik just chuckled and shook his head. He was clearly amused at my reaction.

I picked out a few hideous outfits, holding them up for his approval. "What about this one? I really feel like neon yellow is my color."

He would scrunch his face up in disgust each time, which of course made me want to do it more. There were a few really slutty dresses that she had. Things I would never be caught dead in, but I couldn't help myself, so I held them up for him. "What about this one? I mean, no way could I bend over or sit down while I was wearing it, but I feel like I could pull it off."

He raised an eyebrow, walking to get a closer look. He took the dress from me, looking from it to me. "I could rip that off you and not feel bad about it," he said, smirking.

I felt my cheeks blush at his unexpected answer.

"We should look for some kind of business suit if you're going to accompany Armando and I tomorrow," he said, looking through a rack of clothes.

"I'm sorry, what? I have to like look like I'm some sort of professional? Fu ck that noise. I'm not going."

He laughed, shaking his head. "You don't have to."

I stopped and looked at him, suddenly very serious. "The last time I got any kind of dressed up didn't turn out so great, so you have to promise that you will not leave my side if I wear more than a t-shirt and jeans." I could feel the tears threatening to fall, as I felt a faint shaking in my legs begin.

He was standing in front of me immediately, his arms around me. He pulled me to his chest, holding me tightly. "Sephie. I'm so sorry. You wear whatever you like, but I promise I won't leave your side. No matter what. Pinky swear, even." He stepped back so he could hold out his pinky for me to take. I grabbed his pinky with mine as a stray tear fell down my cheek. He pulled me back to him, holding me tightly. "You know you don't have to go at all. You've been through a lot. Armando will understand. I understand. You don't have to do this."

I was quiet for a moment, trying to get control of myself. I inhaled, stepping back to look at him. "Maybe I can compromise. I'm sure this bougie bi tch has a suit jacket in here somewhere and some fancy pair of jeans that cost more than a month's worth of tips. Business casual for the win!" I said, continuing to look through the racks of clothes. He stood and watched me for a few minutes, then I felt his hand on the back of my neck, pulling me toward him, his fist in my hair. His lips crashed into mine, kissing me passionately. My knees went weak. He caught me, lifting me off the floor while his mou th continued his all-out assault on mine. Finally needing to come up for air, I asked, "what was that for?" trying to catch my breath.

He smirked at me. "I fuc king love you."

I managed to find a suit jacket, nice blouse, and a pair of jeans that would pass for somewhat business attire. I was lucky this cheating girlfriend of Armando's was roughly the same size as me. The only thing that I couldn't make quite work was her shoes. She was considerably shorter than I was, which meant none of her shoes fit me. The only options I had were my converse sneakers or the heels I wore to the ball. While I would've been perfectly happy in the sneakers, I went with the heels since I was trying to be somewhat presentable.

This is completely overrated.

Adrik had borrowed a suit from Armando, as they were roughly the same size. I came out of the bathroom, trying to decide what to do with my hair, to see Adrik in dark grey slacks and a black shirt. My favorite. I hadn't put the jacket on yet, but I had put the heels on to make sure I could walk in them. I was getting better each day, but I was still quite sore. I wanted to make sure I wasn't going to regret my choice later, so I walked around in them while getting ready.

I stopped to look him over, just as he did the same for me. As he continued to look me up and down, I asked, "what should I do with my hair? We're very limited on options since Ms. Jackson isn't here."

"Your hair always looks good, no matter what you do with it." He went to look me up and down one more time, but tried to be discreet about it, as he looked down to adjust the cuff of his shirt. It reminded me of the first time I saw him.

"Okay, be right back." I walked back into the bathroom to braid my hair how it was the first night we met. I always left a few curls loose around my face and my hair was long enough that my thick braid fell easily over my shoulder. He brought the jacket to me as I was tying the elastic around the end of the braid. His blue eyes went dark as he looked at my handiwork. He didn't say anything, he just held the jacket open for me to slip it on. I turned around and he raised an eyebrow, "you might have to dress up a little more often. You are very sexy."

Chapter Ninety-One

Sephie

As Adrik and I walked toward the driveway to leave, Misha was waiting by the front door. He looked at us, his sweet smile stretching across his face. “You guys are going to fu ck some sh it up, aren’t you?”

I smiled at him, raising my hand for a high-five as I walked past him. They never ceased to amaze me with what they could remember.

We arrived at Armando’s office building early, so he could show us the details of the project. If Adrik was supposed to be a business partner, he would at least need a working knowledge of the project to sell it. Armando also told me everything he knew about the men we would be meeting with. His assistant stuck her head in the office, “they’ve just arrived, sir. I’ve shown them to the boardroom.”

“Thank you, Giana.” He looked at both of us, expectantly. Stephen and Andrei were stationed at the front door, checking people as they entered the building. Viktor and Ivan were outside the meeting and Misha was with us. Adrik said he wanted to know immediately if anything felt off, so he wanted Misha close. He wanted to get me out of there right away if Misha had the slightest feeling that it was going to go badly. It definitely made me feel more comfortable having both of them with me.

The men that Mando was meeting with were much older. They looked like hardened businessmen but were completely taken aback to see a woman walk into the meeting and sit down across from them.

This should be fun.

Armando made the introductions. He had given both of us fake names for the meeting. After, they got right down to business. There was a lawyer, an investor, and a politician in the meeting. Armando was most worried about the politician since he’s the one that had screwed him out of a deal previously. I could see that the politician was nervous even before we sat down. His skin was moist, like he was sweating but trying to hide it. The other two were bigger problems, from what I could see.

The lawyer kept looking at me like he was undressing me with his eyes. I could feel Adrik’s temper rising next to me. I slid my hand to his leg under the table, trying to calm him. He glanced sideways at me, Yep, he was definitely angry at that man looking at me that way. I could see it all over his face. I squeezed his leg, hoping to reassure him that I was fine.

The investor wasn’t much better but was more discreet. I was sure they both had very d irty thoughts running through their minds the entire time. Once Armando had finished his presentation on the project, they had questions for him. This is what I was waiting for, as I could figure out what their intentions were as they spoke.

The politician was hiding something, but I couldn’t tell what. It was almost like he feared either Armando or the two men he was with. He would nervously wipe his forehead periodically. The investor was mostly quiet but would smirk when the politician spoke. The lawyer was slimy. As the meeting progressed, he got more blatant about staring at me. I could feel the heat coming off Adrik as he watched this gross old man looking at me. I kept my hand on his leg, trying to keep him calm. After one particularly long stare, Adrik simply reached over and pulled my chair closer to his, placing his hand on my leg across my lap. It was so hard not to smile at the lawyer’s face.

Did he just pub licly claim me?

I heard Misha clear his throat behind us, knowing that he was struggling to not laugh as well. The lawyer’s tone changed after Adrik moved me closer to him. He was being overly nice in the beginning. It wasn’t genuine in the least. He was covering for something. As soon as Adrik stopped the reel of di rty thoughts going through his mind, he not longer tried to play nice. Everyone noticed the change.

Armando had missed Adrik pulling me closer, as he was speaking with the investor when it happened. He was somewhat taken aback at the change. The lawyer was suddenly demanding unreasonable percentages of the project, as well as making unreal timelines for construction. Armando was getting frustrated with trying to come up with a solution. Anytime the lawyer spoke, Adrik would look at me. 1 shook my head no discreetly, indicating that he was not being entirely forthright. The same for the investor. I leaned over and quietly whispered, “the investor is lying. He’s been lying this whole time. The politician is scared to death and the lawyer is a slimeball, but he’s got ulterior motives. I doubt they’re his own. Most lawyers work for somebody and he is most definitely not working for this investor.”

Armando was getting frustrated trying to find ways to satisfy their demands when Adrik interrupted him. “Gentlemen, let’s cut the bu llshit. This project will help this city. It will create jobs, it will create new tax revenue, it will benefit the people of this city greatly. And yet, you’re more worried about how much money it will make you personally. Judging by your suits, I’d say you already have plenty of money, which means you’re just being greedy.” He looked at the investor. “You, sir, haven’t been truthful this entire time.” He then looked to the politician, who looked even more nervous that Adrik was addressing him. “And you, sir. You’re scared. Either of the men you’re sitting with or of us. Given that we’re the ones trying to make this city better with this project, I would bet it’s the men you’re with that you’re scared of.” Lastly, he looked at the lawyer. “You,” he paused, trying to contain his anger. “You’re working for someone else, aren’t you? Behind the scenes? Given how you conduct yourself in front of a lady, I’d dare to guess that you’re not the brightest man in the room, so I doubt these demands you’ve come here with today are your own. You can go back and tell whomever it is you’re working for that they can either come to us themselves or they can find another project to partner on.”

Chapter Ninety-Two

Sephie

There was a visible flash of fear across the lawyer's face for a brief moment, but it quickly changed to anger. The politician looked like he might vomit, and the investor didn't look much better. They were speechless. Armando looked to Adrik, surprised but thankful for his words. I placed my hand on top of his, as his arm was still protectively across my lap as he spoke to the three men across the table.

Misha cleared his throat once again behind us, I glanced back to him. He shook his head no once. I tightened my grip on Adrik's hand. He didn't even look at me, he just stood up, adjusting his suit jacket. He glared at the men across the table, causing them to shrink back. "I think we're done here, gentlemen. My men will see you out," he said motioning toward the door.

The three men stood, gathered their things, and walked out quickly. Viktor and Ivan had been listening through Misha's earpiece the entire time. They were expecting them. Andrei and Stephen were as well. Adrik followed them to the door, keeping the intimidation factor high. He closed the door behind them, cursing under his breath, running a hand through his hair. I knew he was still angry. I stood from my chair, happy to have a moment to stretch. My hip was somewhat sore from sitting. Or from the heels. Or both. Adrik walked quickly to me. As he closed the distance, I could see his eyes searching mine, wondering if I was okay. I smiled at him. He put both hands on either side of my face, his lips crashing to mine. I knew he was trying to calm himself. I smiled against his lips. "You've been wanting to do that for like an hour now, haven't you?"

"You have no idea, solnishko," he groaned. I heard Misha laugh quietly behind us. We both turned to look at him.

"What? I wouldn't have been able to wait until the meeting was over with that guy looking at you like that. You have more self-control than I do, Boss."

Armando was puzzled, as he was blissfully unaware of everything that had happened during the meeting. "Somebody tell me what's going on here."

"The politician was terrified of the other two men. That was the first red flag. The investor was lying the entire time, just like Ghost said. And the lawyer spent most of your presentation thinking about all the dirty things he wanted to do to me. After Ghost completely destroyed his fantasies, that's when he switched to full-on asshole. Lawyers are always working for someone else, so there's another player behind the scenes that you don't know about making all those unrealistic demands. The temperature of the room changed after Ghost called them out, which is why they were escorted out quickly," I said.

Armando sat down, somewhat in shock. "I missed all of this. I was so focused on trying to make this project work that I missed everything you just said." He put his head in his hands, thinking about what had just taken place.

Adrik spoke. "I think the investor might be an actor. If you investigate who he is, I doubt you will find someone wealthy enough to be able to afford an investment into this project. The bigger question is why the politician was afraid of them and most importantly, who the lawyer is working for behind the scenes."

Armando stood and walked to the phone at the other end of the table. He pressed a button and his assistant answered. "Giana, could you come to the boardroom, please?"

She walked in soon after. Armando was still standing. "Ah, Giana, can you get me everything you can find on the three men that were just here? I want to know everything. Use whoever you need to, but I want to know everything. Who they're working with now, who they've worked with in the past. All of it."

"Right away, sir," she nodded to all of us as she left the boardroom, her eyes lingering on Misha as she walked past. I caught his eye, raising my eyebrows several times, and smiling. His cheeks flushed as his broad smile stretched across his face. He just shrugged his shoulders. I thought Misha was insanely adorable, but I found myself both secretly loving it when other women found any of them attractive, but also feeling overly protective of them at the same time. This must be what it's like to have hot older brothers…

Armando walked to me and Adrik. He extended his hand to Adrik, who took it. "Thank you, sir. You've saved me quite a few headaches today." He looked to me, opening his arms, "and you, my dear, you have a gift. I'm going to need you for all my important meetings," he said embracing me. "Come, I must take you to lunch. It's the least I can do."

"I will happily take you up on that offer," I said, stepping back from Armando, only to feel Adrik's hand on my back pulling me to him.

He whispered in my ear so only I could hear, "tell me if you get tired or you want to go back. You won't offend him. He understands." He kissed my cheek.

"I'll be okay, as long as we don't walk too much. My hip is not agreeing with these shoes."

He smirked at me, "Ivan has your sneakers with him."

"Shut up."

"He brought them just in case you had issues."

As we walked to the front door of the building, Ivan was waiting by the door, holding my sneakers in one hand.

"Ivan, you're not only squishy inside you're all soft and nougaty too," I said, holding onto his shoulder so I could take the heels off and slip on the sneakers.

"I had a feeling something like this would happen, princess. It's best to be prepared," he said with a wink.

"Noted, you giant lovable Russian bear you."

Chapter Ninety-Three

Adrik

We walked to lunch, as it wasn't very far from Armando's office building. The weather was nice and since Sephie had more comfortable shoes on, I wasn't quite as worried about her. Her limp was slightly more pronounced today, I think because of the heels she wore. I somewhat felt guilty about enjoying her in heels again though. I liked having her even taller than she normally was.

Armando was busy discussing business matters as we walked through the streets. It was a beautiful city, and the weather was almost perfect, not too hot, not too cool. I listened intently to Armando, responding when needed, but I was also trying to focus on Sephie's reactions to what she saw as we walked. I loved watching her. She found beauty and wonderment in everything. Strangers walking past us would inevitably stare at her, at her beauty, but also at her obvious innocence. It was like they couldn't help but feel drawn toward her.

The same feeling I had when I was near her, just to a lesser degree. I squeezed her hand, wanting to kiss her instead, but I had to pretend to be listening to Armando. She looked over at me, giving me that smile that threatened to stop my heart every time.

As we sat at the restaurant, the topic of the earlier meeting came up once again. Armando was still surprised at how well Sephie could size people up. "Sephie, how did you come across this gift of yours? Have you always been able to read people this well?" he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders. "I guess I've always been able to do it. The things I notice seem obvious to me. Like how you missed the subtle cues in the meeting, for example. It doesn't mean you can't read people. You were just trying so hard to will that project into existence to help the people of the city even more than you already do that you were. willing to compromise on working with sketchy characters to get it accomplished. You have a big heart. I wouldn't say that's a bad trait to have, but it probably means you get taken advantage of more than you should: You know, by whorish girlfriends who only want you for your money." She winked at him, smiling broadly.

He swore under his breath. "You should market your services, my dear."

The guys were all chuckling, knowing full well how good Sephie was at saying what needed to be said. Ivan looked at Armando. "You haven't seen anything yet. Wait until she gets to know you a little better. She'll find those dark places that you don't want anybody to see, and she'll shine a light directly on them."

"But then she'll show you how it was never a weakness to begin with and how you were beating yourself up for it needlessly," Stephen said.

Sephie looked down, blushing. Armando looked to each of the guys who each had a knowing look on their face, completely in agreement at what Ivan and Stephen just said. He looked to me, nodding. He raised his glass and everyone at the table raised theirs. "To Sephie, the most remarkable woman we've ever met," he said. Her cheeks were almost as red as her hair after he toasted her. I leaned over, kissing her cheek, feeling both proud and lucky that she was mine.

We spent a few hours in the outdoor courtyard at the restaurant. It was a secluded spot where we could talk freely about business. The guys had a clear line of sight on every entrance and exit and could easily see the road in front of the restaurant as well. Since all the guys had been able to listen to the meeting through Misha's earpiece, they gave their opinions on what happened. Like me, they were concerned with who was pulling the strings in the background that we didn't know about, as well as what the politician was afraid of.

Viktor asked what I had been worried about. "Do you think Lorenzo or Anthony could be the one behind the lawyer? Maybe that's who the politician is really scared of?"

I nodded. "I had thought the same thing. I wouldn't put it past them to try and undermine Armando since he went against Salvadori and stood with me. It would be easier for them to try it here than at home."

Sephie turned to look at me, her eyes wide. "If the lawyer is working for one of them, then they know now that you're alive and I'm here and not where they're looking for me." She turned to Armando. "That also means the guys who took me are likely in trouble once Salvadori finds out they betrayed him." She turned back to me. I could see the fear in her eyes, even though she was trying to remain calm.

Ivan spoke up first. "There's a chance that the lawyer won't divulge the physical description of you and Boss to whomever he's working for. You gave fake names and he might not even know of your existence. We don't know for sure yet that he's working for Lorenzo and Anthony." She looked at him, willing herself to believe his words.

Andrei said, "don't worry, spider monkey. They won't get you." She nodded but dropped her gaze. Armando picked up the conversation while I pulled her chair closer to mine. She wouldn't look at me, but I could see her internal struggle she was having. I put my hand on her leg, immediately feeling the shaking. Just as I was about to suggest we make our way back to Armando's villa, his phone rang. His assistant had found information that she felt he needed to see.

"Come, let's return to the office and hopefully shed some light on this little mystery," he said, standing up and folding his napkin on his plate. The guys stood as well. When Sephie went to stand, she flinched, cursing under her breath. Her hand went to her hip, pressing against her wound. I went to help her, but she held a finger up asking for a moment. It took her a second to stand up completely straight. When she did, she had a clearly pained look on her face.

"Solnishko, what's wrong? What can I do?" I asked, trying to help support her.

"No idea. That's never happened before," she said, still pressing on her wound.

"What was it? What happened?"

"It was like a shooting pain through my hip when I went to stand up. I'm okay now. We can go," she said, giving me a tight smile.

Andrei stepped in front of her, a small smile on his face. "Spider monkey," he said as he turned his back to her, squatting down to her level and opening his arms. He was offering to carry her back to the office. She put her hands on his shoulders, but then stopped herself.

"I don't think I can jump, Bubba."

I walked behind her, lifting her so she could wrap her arms and legs around Andrei. He gently bounced her a little higher and looked back at her. "Good?"

She nodded to him, then looked at me, mouthing, "thank you," as Andrei walked toward the front of the restaurant with her. I ran my hand through my hair, worried about more than Lorenzo and Anthony. I didn't like seeing her in pain. When we got back to the house, I would insist she change the bandage so we could look at it. She'd been diligent about taking her antibiotics after that first day she missed because she was sleeping, but that didn't mean there wasn't a small infection setting in. I would call a doctor to come to her, if needed. I caught Misha's gaze as we were leaving. He looked just as concerned as I felt.

Chapter Ninety-Four

Adrik

We left Armando at the office and took Sephie straight back to the villa. I wanted her to be able to lie down and I wanted to change her bandage. Once we pulled up to the villa, I stepped out of the vehicle, extending my hand to help her out. Once she stepped out, I reached down and picked her up. She wrapped her arms around my neck and shoulders, resting her head on my shoulder. She smiled at me, "I'm okay now. It went away," she yawned as her fingers played with the collar of my shirt, running lightly over my neck and chest.

I walked her to the bedroom, laying her gently on the bed. She stretched while she kicked her shoes off. "Maybe it was just sitting for that long. It was sore when I stood up in the boardroom, too," she said, still stretching her body.

I stood over her, unbuttoning her jeans. "I still want to change your bandage just in case. You could barely stand. If there's a problem, I need to know." She smiled lazily at me. She carefully pushed her jeans down over the bandage so I could pull them the rest of the way off. I hadn't seen the panties she had chosen to wear until that moment. My breath caught as I slid my hands up her legs, running over the thin black lace. She closed her eyes as I leaned down and kissed her stomach.

"You're not making this any easier," I said, my hands still running over her body.

She opened one eye, grinning at me. "Maybe it was that pair of jeans. That bougie bi tch might've been skinnier than me. Or else she enjoys feeling like she's being slowly choked by her clothes," she said. She pushed her stomach out, patting it with her hands. "Or maybe I ate so much food that my pants were too tight on my hip."

I sat beside her, taking her hands from her stomach, kissing each one. "You're still too skinny. You're all bony and sharp. You can afford to eat more, solnishko." I pulled her panties off her hip so I could have access to her bandage, kissing her stomach just above the waistline. She folded one arm behind her head, so she could watch me. I took the bandage off as delicately as I could, but it still hurt her every time. Her skin was extra sensitive from the adhesive.

Her wound still looked mostly normal, but it was getting redder around the edges. "Sephie, I don't know. I think you should see a doctor, just to be safe." She sat up slightly so she could look at it.

"Did we bring anything to clean it with? Maybe it just needs to be cleaned again. I don't want to see another doctor. I ha te doctors. I haven't missed my antibiotic. It shouldn't be infected." She put her hand over it. "It's not hot like it would be if it were infected."

I clicked my tongue at her. "I still think you should see a doctor."

"But I don't want to. I just need to clean it and it will be fine." She had that determined look in her eye that told me I was not going to change her mind on this one. I opted for a compromise instead.

"We'll clean it for now, but if that sharp pain comes back that prevents you from standing, I'm calling a doctor whether you want me to or not." I looked at her sternly. It was all I could do not to smile at her during this standoff.

She cracked first, grinning at me. "Deal."

When I came back with antiseptic to clean her wound, she was still stretched out on the bed, panties half off, shirt pulled up, exposing her milky whi te, toned stomach, completely comfortable on the bed. I couldn't help but grin at her as I walked to the bed. She was so comfortable in her own skin around me. Around the guys too. She didn't care if she looked si lly, in fact most of the time she went out of her way to look si lly to get a laugh out of us. It was refreshing to be around a woman that wasn't constantly worried about how she looked. Sephie was real. I knew she accepted me for me, all the parts of me, good and bad, because she accepted all the parts of herself. She had seen real darkness, but she still chose to shine her light on the world. She made peace with those dark parts of her, taking away their power. It gave me hope that I could eventually do the same. She looked at me with so much love, even after reading every part of my soul.

I paused, after closing the door, completely lost in the sight of her. She leaned up on her elbows to look at me, raising one eyebrow. God, she was sexy when she wasn't even trying to be.

"What are you doing?" she asked, a questioning look on her face. She broke me from my thoughts.

"Just enjoying the view, solnishko. Come, let's get your wound cleaned so you can put clothes back on before I rip. another pair of panties off you."

"Whatever. I have an endless supply of them now, so knock yourself out," she said laughing. She stood up to walk to the bathroom, giving me a full view of her a ss that was barely covered by the black lace. I cursed under my breath, exhaling as I followed her to the bathroom.

"You're a little evil, solnishko," I said, smacking her as s lightly.

She looked at me over her shoulder. "You love it." Just to drive her point home, she slipped out of her blouse and tossed it back to me as she walked into the bathroom.

"You're a lot evil, solnishko." I cursed under my breath again. She was clearly enjoying teasing me, as she turned toward me, chewing her bottom lip, as she pulled one side of her panties lower to give me access to her wound. She leaned against the bathroom counter as I tried to concentrate on cleaning her wound and not bending her over the counter. I could do this.

Fu ck. I can't do this. She's driving me crazy.

I grabbed some gauze to catch the antiseptic as I poured it over her wound and kneeled in front of her. I looked up at her. "You ready?"

"Nope but do it anyway."

I poured out as little as I could. The liquid started to bubble in the wound. She inhaled sharply, clenching her jaw and closing her eyes tightly. "I'm sorry, solnishko."

"It's okay. It's okay. Just keep going." I poured out more liquid. More bubbles. She slapped the counter, cursing. "Again. I'm okay." Once again, I poured more liquid over the wound. "FU CKING HE LL!"

"I'm sorry, solnishko. You told me to! I'm sorry!"

"No, it's okay. It's not you. It fu cking burns. Cursing makes me feel slightly better." She ran her hand through my hair, trying to smile through her pain.

"I should give you a minute. It's still bubbling though. I think we should do it again."

"Easy for you to say," she said. She was fanning her hip with one hand. I leaned closer to bl ow on it, trying to give her relief from the constant burning. "How does Ivan stand there like nothing is happening with this stuff?"

I chuckled. "He still hasn't told you?"

"Told me what?"

"He doesn't feel much pain. He was born that way. His nerves don't work the same way. He doesn't register pain the same way you and I do. Some pain he feels, but other pain doesn't register. It makes him a very dangerous opponent."

"I knew there was something to his inability to feel pain! I could use some of that right about now," she said, chewing on her lip.

"I'm sorry, love. One more time, then I put a new bandage on you so you can put your clothes back on." I tried not to look at her chewing on her lip. I couldn't figure out why that was so sexy to me, but I had trouble controlling myself every time she did it.

When I had finished putting the bandage on her, she leaned down placing both her hands on either side of "Thank you," she said, pressing her lips to mine.

my face.

"We should've done this sooner. We should make sure to do it more often. Or else I'm going to call a doctor," I said before she could argue.

"If it keeps the doctor away, I'll happily endure the torture."

I shook my head. I'd never met anyone other than Ivan that had such an aversion to doctors. If it meant I could help her, then I'd gladly keep the doctor away for now. Whatever made her better.

Chapter Ninety-Five

Sephie

The next two days were mostly quiet. The guys were coming and going periodically, meeting various people, gathering information. Adrik never once left me. If he needed to go somewhere, I went with him. It might seem excessive, but I was glad for it. I was still struggling with the thought of never seeing him again. Having him around right now was helping me keep those thoughts at bay.

He was still threatening to call a doctor for the wound on my hip. It was somewhat of a dull, constant pain now, wasn't going to tell him that. He had plenty to worry about already and I wanted to skip the doctor. I was almost finished with the antibiotics, so I was hoping it would start to feel better soon.

but I

We were all in Armando's gym in the morning when Ivan asked me about my hip. I was still limping occasionally, despite my best efforts to hide it. He noticed and asked me about it. Before I could even answer, Adrik said "it's not healing like it should be, but she's refusing to let me call the doctor. I might do it anyway and deal with the consequences later."

I squinted my eyes at him. "It's fine. I don't need a doctor."

"It's not fine, princess. You're limping still when you should be getting better. Let me see it?" Ivan asked. "I might be able to help. I have extensive experience with healing wounds without doctors," he added when I looked at him. skeptically.

"Ok, you're going to have to expand on that later," I said. I looked to Adrik, to make sure he was okay with me basically giving Ivan a view down my pants. He nodded. I pulled Ivan away from everyone, not really wanting to show everyone the somewhat gaping hole in my hip, even though I could feel their curious eyes on us.

I slid my pants low enough that I could peel back the bandage so he could see most of the wound. It was red and there was starting to be some heat to it as well, which usually means infection. I had to admit, I was starting to worry a little bit. Ivan bent down to get a closer look at it. He clicked his tongue. "It hurts you all the time, doesn't it?"

I nodded, exhaling. "But please don't tell Adrik. He has enough to worry about right now and he's already stressed enough as it is without worrying that my hip is gonna fall off soon."

Ivan chuckled. "Your hip won't fall off, princess."

"You don't know. It might," I said, raising an eyebrow at him.

"What have you been putting on it?"

"Adrik insists on cleaning it every day. I think he's starting to enjoy torturing me if I'm being honest. But that's it. Then we just put a fresh bandage on it. It's like a dull ache now all the time. I cut back on the superprofen, but I want to start taking more of that again because it's starting to hurt more."

Ivan thought for a moment. I glanced toward Adrik to see that he was watching us, a look of concern on his face. I looked back to Ivan, hoping he would figure something out so I wouldn't have to give in and let Adrik call a doctor. I could see the light bulb moment as he came up with a solution. He glanced down at me, the corners of his mouth turning up in a discreet smile. "Come with me," he said, grabbing my hand and pulling me toward the door.

"Do you have something that will keep Adrik from calling a doctor? Please tell me you have something," I asked, following behind him.

"Potentially. It's an ancient remedy, but it's worked for me before."

I followed him in silence as he led me to the kitchen. I looked at him, puzzled that we were in the kitchen. He smirked at me.

"Just wait, princess. It'll make sense in a moment." He checked the counters, then stepped into the pantry, looking for whatever he was looking for. He walked out, carrying a glass jar.

"Is it snack time?" I asked, somewhat confused.

He was holding a jar of honey. He handed it to me as he walked to me. "No, this is for your wound. Honey is a very good antiseptic and it has healing properties as well. People have been using it to heal wounds for centuries." He lifted his shirt, showing me a particularly nasty scar across his rib cage. "It healed this," he said as he dragged his finger over the scar.

"That looks like it was painful." I looked up him, my curiosity peaked. "How do you know so much about this stuff? And about drugs in general? I remember hearing you quiz the doctor when we were up north."

He sighed, folding his arms across his sizeable chest. He leaned back against the counter. I could tell he was lost in a memory and by the looks of his face, it wasn't exactly a pleasant one. I put my hand on his shoulder, which made him look at me. I could see the pain in his eyes, clear as day. "Ivan, you don't have to tell me. It's okay. I can see that whatever it was, it wasn't good."

He nodded his head. "I don't feel pain like normal people. My mother took me to the doctor as a young boy because I was always getting hurt but never felt any pain. I never cried when I would break a bone. She thought there was something wrong with me. The doctor referred us to another doctor in a larger city outside the small village I grew up in. That doctor was part of a secret military group that was trying to build the perfect soldier. He convinced my mother to turn me over so they could study me. I'm not the only one that's ever been born this way, but we're rare. She was reluctant at first, but they told her they would give me an education and they would even pay for my brothers and sister to go to school. We were poor, so school wasn't really an option. She eventually agreed, because she thought it would be a better situation for me than what she could provide on her own. My father had been killed in a mining accident shortly after my youngest brother was born, so my mother was left with four kids to raise on her own." He paused for a moment, lost in his memory. I shifted my weight back and forth, trying to find a comfortable position. while I waited for him to continue. He wasn't even looking at me, but he still reached over and set me on the counter. "At first, the people who were 'studying' me were mostly nice. The original doctor saw to it that I went to school, was fed, and was well looked after. That changed when a new doctor took over the research. I don't know what happened to the first doctor, but I never saw him again. The new doctor was an asshole. He didn't care about school. He just wanted to run tests on me all day, every day. He really didn't even care if I was fed. When I started to refuse to do some of the tests, he would withhold food from me until I relented. This went on for years. I was 7 years old when I entered the program. I was 9 when the asshole doctor took over. As I got older and started growing more, they started training me. I knew every kind of martial arts there is by 13. When I was 15, I was transferred to a new facility, where I lived with other boys. None of them were like me, but they all had reasons why they were in the program. It was nice to have other boys my age for a while, but it didn't last. Around 16, they started making us fight each other. If we refused, we were punished. One of the boys I fought almost died because of me. So, I started refusing because the other boys didn't have the same kind of training I'd had and they all clearly felt pain, unlike me. They would starve me, lock me up in a room with no windows, sometimes they'd make me stay in complete darkness for weeks on end. Anything they could think of to break me. They were trying to turn me into a killer.

Chapter Ninety-Six

Sephie

I gasped, putting my hand over my mouth. He continued, “I kept refusing for close to a year. It didn’t matter what they tried to do to me, I wasn’t going to fight any of the boys because they didn’t have training. They changed tactics and brought in military guys. They said if I wouldn’t fight untrained boys, then I could fight trained men. They wanted to see how I would respond to pain and how I would heal from being injured. I finally agreed, mostly because I just wanted to eat again.”

I held my hand up, saying “amen to that.”

He chuckled, then continued, “the first couple of fights, I got my ass kicked. They were stronger than me and I was weak from malnourishment. As time went on, though, I got stronger, and the tables turned. I started beating the grown men with ease. I almost killed a few of them, a couple of them probably wish I had killed them, and I eventually did legitimately kill one of them. They didn’t stop after that happened, either. They kept sending in more guys, week after week. I realized it was never going to stop. Whatever their research was, it was going to continue, unless I got away from them. One night, right before I turned 18, I broke out. I killed 6 people that night in order to escape. I can still see their faces clearly.” He closed his eyes. His shoulders slumped forward. He looked tired and small.

1 hopped down from the counter. I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him to me. “Ivan…” I felt his giant arms around me, holding onto me. He took in a deep breath and held it. I knew he was fighting back tears. Fighting back the memories that had been haunting him all these years. I didn’t know what to say, or if there was anything to say that could make this better. So, I stayed silent. I just held onto him, trying to give him what he’d been missing all those years. A safe harbor. His grip on me tightened as he struggled to get control. Eventually, I felt him relax a little and he loosened his grip on me. I stepped back, looking at him. He looked haunted.

I remembered what my father had said to me in my dream. It seemed applicable. “Ivan, look at me.” He glanced down at me, but wouldn’t hold my gaze for long. I reached up and gently pressed my hands on either side of his face and forced him to look at me. “Ivan, sometimes Karma uses you to deliver justice. You simply handed down their sentences.”

He looked at me for a few moments. That haunted look slowly started to disappear. As he mulled over my words in his head, he asked, “how do you do that?”

“How do I do what?”

“You always know exactly what we need to hear.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “It’s a gift,” I said, grinning at him.

He shook his head, laughing quietly. He bent down and hugged me again. When he stood up this time, his face was much softer.

“Does anyone else know this?” I asked.

“Not to this extent. They know about my inability to feel pain and that I hate doctors because of being experimented on when I was a kid.”

1 simply nodded my head. “You’re the only person I’ve told the entire story to,” he said, his hands running through his black goatee.

“I’m honored,” I said, smiling at him. “And to think, I used to think you wanted to murder me in my sleep. Now you’re all soft and nougaty with me.” I poked him in the ribs, as he laughed.

“I would never hurt you again, princess.”

“What’s this again, bullshit?” I asked, standing up straight to try and look him in the eye.

“The ball. I can’t get the picture of your face out of my head as I had to run past you, and I still hear you calling out for Adrik and then for me when you were out on the plane.”

“Ivan. Don’t do that. Don’t beat yourself up. I still standby calling it a stupid plan, but mostly because of the execution. Your intentions were always good. I was never meant to get hurt. All of you guys have always done nothing but protect me and keep me safe. I never once doubted that you didn’t mean for me to get hurt in all that. So. Stop that nonsense right now before I kick your ass.”

He laughed. It made me happy to see him visibly lighter. He grabbed the jar of honey and offered me his arm. “Come, we’ll go get Adrik and I’ll show him how to pack your wound. I don’t want to do it without him there.” He looked down at me, one eyebrow raised. “It’s too close to your no-no zone.”

I slid my arm through his, laughing. “That’s fair. That’s totally fair.”

When we got back to the gym, Adrik looked worried, but tried to mask it. I smiled at him, as I put my hand on his shoulder and whispered, “I missed you.” His handsome smile stretched across his face. He put his arm around me, pulling me to his side.

“Ivan has a way to make us both happy,” I said, grinning up at him.

He looked down at me, surprised, then looked to Ivan, who held up the jar of honey. “I’ll show you how to pack it with this. It should start healing quicker.”

Adrik nodded his head. Then leaned down to kiss my cheek. “If this doesn’t work, I’m calling the doctor.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” I said, rolling my eyes. His hand ran down to my ass, grabbing it forcefully enough that I let out at small yelp. He cursed under his breath as he nodded for Ivan to follow us.

We went to our bedroom. Ivan showed Adrik how to pack the wound with honey and enough gauze that I wouldn’t inevitably leak sweet sticky syrup over everything. Once the new bandage was on, Ivan said, “leave this one on for two days. Give it time to calm down. Antiseptic is good, but sometimes makes things worse. It can be too harsh. This will soothe it and help the healing start.

Chapter Ninety-Seven

Sephie

Adrik looked skeptical. I looked at Ivan and said, “show him the scar you healed this way. He doesn’t believe you.” Ivan lifted his shirt, showing Adrik the long scar across his ribs.

“I refused to go to a doctor and get stitches. I used honey and packed it, same way as I showed you.”

Adrik looked from Ivan, then to me, then back to Ivan. “How long until we know it’s working?” He was visibly tense.

Ivan thought for a minute. “I don’t know exactly. I couldn’t feel this one, so I don’t know if it helped with the pain or not, but you should see it physically start to look better after the first bandage change in a couple of days.”

Adrik nodded, then looked to me. “If it doesn’t look better when we take that bandage off, I’m calling a doctor. I’m serious this time, Sephie. I need you better,” he said, his voice angrier than he probably meant it to be.

“Like I don’t? Like I want to be in pain for various reasons for an entire month? Like I want to worry about my hip just falling off from infection? Like I want to worry about not saying anything because I don’t want to worry you with more shit?” He looked somewhat stunned. Ivan smirked at me, nodding discreetly as he turned to leave as quickly as possible. Coward.

Adrik sat down next to me on the bed. He started to speak, then changed his mind. He leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees. He stared at the carpet for a few minutes but said nothing. I sat and watched him trying to find the right words. I wasn’t angry, but I also wasn’t going to take his anger at my aversion to doctors. I had my reasons.

He sat up, turning to look at me. His blue eyes were questioning, searching mine trying to find the answer to his silent question. I sighed. “I have a good reason for hating doctors. Can you please just trust me on that one and let me make my own decisions about my body?”

He opened his mouth to speak, then shut it, then thought for a minute more. Finally, he said, “Sephie, I never meant to…”

I cut him off. “I know you didn’t. I know you want me better just as much as I want to be better.” I sighed. “The last month has been a lot. I have a lot going on in my head. Some days I feel like I’m barely keeping it together. The doctor thing will be the proverbial straw that breaks this gazelle’s back if you force it.”

His face softened as he reached up to trace the features of my face with his finger. “Okay. How do I make you better without making it worse?”

“Stop threatening to call a doctor, for one. Let’s try Ivan’s idea. If it doesn’t get better, I promise I will tell you. You just have so much on your mind already that I don’t want to bother you.”

He exhaled. His blue eyes scanned my face, a small smile on his lips. “You still don’t get it. Nothing else matters. You’re the most important thing to me. If you’re not better, I don’t care about any of the rest of it. That’s why I’m so frustrated and why I came across as angry with you. I’m racking my brain trying to come up with ways to fix you and the only solid solution I can think of, you refuse. I don’t know how else to help and quite frankly, it’s a blow to my ego.”

It was my turn to be stunned. He traced his finger lightly over my face once again, the small smile still present. “You’re always taking care of everyone else. Even today. I’m sure you managed to help Ivan with his demons. It doesn’t take that long to find a jar of honey. All while you’re trying to hide the pain you’re in because you don’t want to worry me. 1 want so desperately to help you, even if it’s only a fraction of the help you give so freely to everyone else. You deserve to be taken care of, Sephie.”

I dropped my gaze, hearing my uncle’s voice in my head. It was a distant whisper now, but it was still there, almost like an echo. Telling me I wasn’t deserving of anything, that no one would ever love me. I shut my eyes, not wanting to hear his voice, not wanting to think about any of this. I felt Adrik’s lips on my forehead. “He’s wrong, you know. Everything he said to you, everything he tried to beat into you. All of it. It’s all wrong. You, above everyone I’ve ever known, are the most deserving of love. The most deserving to be taken care of.” My breath hitched as I tried to choke back a sob. I felt the tears falling on my cheeks, despite my best efforts to keep them contained.

“Sephie, look at me.” I inhaled but didn’t open my eyes right away. I was trying to gain control before opening my eyes. He waited patiently. When I did open my eyes, his deep blue eyes were looking at me as sincerely as I’d ever seen them. He reached up with his thumb and wiped the tears from my eyes. “You’re worthy of everything I can give you and so much more. I love you more than life itself and I will spend the rest of this life and all of the next proving to you that I will always be with you when you’re walking through the shadows of your past.”

I searched his eyes, always looking, always doubting. Never finding the change I was expecting. He held my gaze, letting me search. I was starting to think he kind of liked it. There was an openness to him now that wasn’t there before, like he knew what I was doing and was inviting me in. I chewed on my bottom lip. “How did you know?”

“How did I know what?”

“What my uncle used to say to me.”

“When you were passed out on the plane. You were talking in your sleep. We heard you struggling against what he had constantly told you. It was… haunting.”

My eyes went wide in shock. I had no idea. And they all heard it. “Sephie, you think that people will think less of you because of what you went through, when the reality is that we all admire your strength and wish we had even an ounce of it. What you went through then and what you’ve been through just since I met you, would have broken many people. Completely broken them. But you keep going, you keep smiling, you keep bringing joy to everyone’s life while doing dumb shit like not telling me that you’re in pain because you don’t want to bother me.” He smirked at me. I couldn’t help but smile. “You are the most amazing woman I’ve ever known and I will keep trying to prove that to you, as long as it takes.”

I moved closer to him, resting my head on his shoulder. His arm slid around my waist, holding me close. I closed my eyes, lost in my thoughts, still unsure how I got so lucky to have this man love me so completely

Chapter Ninety-Eight

Adrik

It was early afternoon. Misha had Sephie’s attention, telling her some story. I stood off to the side, watching her as she listened intently to him. Ivan walked up beside me. “Everything okay now, Boss?” I knew he was referring to seeing me get angry with Sephie earlier.

I sighed. “For now, yes. I agreed to lay off the doctor threats, but I don’t know what else to do if she doesn’t start healing.”

He crossed his sizable arms across his chest, turning to look at me in the eyes. “I’m not telling you what to do when it comes to her, Boss, but I recognize the look in her eye when it comes to the thought of doctors. She let us take her to the hospital after she was attacked because she didn’t have a choice. It was basically the same when we got to the ranch up north. She was too exhausted and in shock to protest. There’s something there that she doesn’t want any of us to see yet that prevents her from trusting doctors. It’s the same look I have.”

I thought for a moment. They were very similar in their aversion to doctors. I could easily see that. I didn’t know the whole story on Ivan, but I knew doctors had basically used him as a test subject when he was younger because of his inability to feel pain. I suspected it was not a happy story. I wasn’t sure why Sephie had such a mistrust of doctors, but I was fearful it was also not a happy story.

I exhaled. “I know, Ivan. I know you’re right. I know there’s something there. I just want to help her so badly and I can’t think of a way to make that happen without a doctor. I want her to be well again. I still feel terrible about everything that’s happened.”

“We all do, Boss. Even though she just told me earlier she was going to kick my ass if I didn’t stop it, I still feel terrible about it.”

I chuckled. At least she was back to acting more like herself, despite her pain. “Let’s just hope your honey trick works so I don’t have to call a doctor and make everything worse.”

He placed his hand on my shoulder. “It will, Boss. You just have to be patient and give her time to heal herself. She’s been through more than most people I know. I don’t think that girl knows how to quit. Let her use that instead of forcing something on her that she doesn’t want.”

I ran my hand through my hair, pondering what Ivan had just said. I closed my eyes, exhaling, trying not to stress over it all. I felt Sephie’s arms slide gently around my waist and her lips press gently to mine. When I opened my eyes, she was looking up at me, her sweet smile stretched across her face. “You look like you just had a very serious conversation.”

I leaned down and kissed her once more. “You’re rubbing off on Ivan. He’s quite good at telling me what I need to hear now.” I looked in the direction where Ivan had been standing, only to see that he was gone.

She grinned. “Ivan is wise beyond his years. He just doesn’t want anybody to know it. He likes his peace too much.”

“When we get home, you’re coming to work for me.”

She cocked her head to the side, thinking. “I’ll consider it. Maybe if you offer to pay me in Vinny’s sandwiches, I’ll consider it more seriously, she laughed.

“Are you hungry again already?” I asked, pulling her closer to me.

She laughed. “No. Well, not yet. Give me twenty minutes and then ask. I am dying to get back just so I can go there. Misha promised me all the Vinny’s I could eat after the ball. I’m holding him to it.” She paused, then added, “someone should probably warn that poor man. He’s going to be so busy…”

We were outside, with Sephie’s head in my lap, her eyes closed enjoying my fingers running through her curls. I couldn’t quite tell if she was asleep or still awake but it didn’t really matter. I would stay like that for as long as she would let me. Armando came up and sat in one of the chairs opposite the couch we were on. He looked troubled. I looked at him, expectantly, waiting for him to speak.

“This project still troubles me. It’s such a large undertaking that I don’t want to fund it entirely myself. I need more investors.”

Without opening her eyes, Sephie said, “why don’t you crowdsource it? Let the people invest. It’s for their benefit, right? Let them have a piece of it, as well. With a large chunk of the city’s population behind the project, the politicians won’t be able to not approve it.”

I looked to Armando, a smirk on my face. Sephie never ceased to amaze me with her ideas. Armando thought for a moment, then exclaimed, “Sephie, you’re a genius! This could actually work! Even better than my original plan. It will give the people even more chances to increase their own wealth, which will inevitably benefit the city too. This could put this city on the worldwide map!” he said, clapping his hands together.

Her eyes still closed, she smiled sweetly, still enjoying my fingers in her hair. Armando quickly stood, taking his phone from his pocket to make a few calls. As he walked away, I leaned down and asked quietly, “so how many sandwiches a day are you thinking you’ll need?”

She giggled and opened her eyes to look at me. I would never stop wanting to see her smile or the way her eyes shined brighter as she laughed.

Armando returned after a few moments, with news from his assistant. “Boss, we have news on the lawyer. My people have been able to uncover some information that they think we’ll be interested in. Since it’s already getting late, I told them to go home tonight and that we would be at the office first thing in the morning to hear the details.”

I felt Sephie tense. She opened her eyes. “Where’s Misha?” She didn’t look alarmed, per se, but she wasn’t relaxed anymore.

“What’s wrong, solnishko?”

“Something about the office. I don’t know what. Where’s Misha? I want to see if he notices it too.”

I called for Misha, explaining Armando’s plan to him. I didn’t say anything about Sephie’s reaction and she was quiet as well. Misha stood for a moment, contemplating, then all at once, his eyes got wide. “Um, Boss, I don’t think that’s a good plan. Something about the office.”

Sephie sat up, her mind racing. “Misha did you notice anything at the meeting? Like did they leave anything? Were they ever alone in the building? Do you think they could’ve done something while they were at the meeting?”

He shook his head no. “We had eyes on them the entire time. I don’t know what it is, Boss, but we shouldn’t be at the office building tomorrow.”

I looked from Misha to Sephie. If they both felt that way, I wasn’t going to argue. I looked to Armando. “Have your people come here tomorrow instead. Only those that are completely necessary. Tell everyone else to stay home. Be as discreet as you can, make up whatever excuse you need to, but make sure they don’t go to the office.”

Armando looked shocked but nodded his head and left to make the necessary calls. I looked to Sephie, somewhat surprised at her reaction. She looked equally as surprised.

“Misha, how does your gut feeling work?” she asked.

He sat down in the chair that Armando had previously been in, thinking. “It depends, really. Sometimes it’s a bad feeling, uh, like nausea. When we were attacked, it was more like a feeling of impending doom right before it happened. I was just about to stop you when they hit us. This one is different still, like I thought about going to the office and heard something tell me not to.” He looked to me, his eyes wide. “I swear I’m not crazy, Boss.”

I chuckled, but before I could answer, Sephie was asking more questions. “Did you hear a ‘don’t go’ when you thought about the office?”

Misha’s eyes got even wider. His mouth fell open slightly. “How did you know that?”

“Because I heard it too. That’s why we called you over here. I wanted to see if you had the same feeling.”

Now, my eyes were wide in shock. Sephie thought for a moment, a small smile appearing as she seemed lost in thought. I ran my hand down her back, not really wanting to interrupt, but curious as to what she was thinking. Just as she looked toward me, a bird swooped down in between the couch we were on and the chair where Misha was sitting. It flew above us, turned, and swooped in between us from the opposite direction.

She giggled. “You were right. It is magnificent,” she said quietly to herself.

When she turned to look at me again, she had tears in her eyes, but she was smiling. She inhaled deeply, “you might think I’m crazy for this, but that’s my dad. When I was asleep when we were up north, I was stuck in that loop at the ball until you pulled me out of it. Once I was free of that scene playing over and over, I was allowed to see my dad again. He’s been watching over me my entire life. He told me that what happened was necessary for everyone, especially when it came to believing Misha’s gut instincts.” She leaned into me as I wrapped an arm around her. “He’s the one that told me you’d been laying underneath me for 12 hours so I wouldn’t get sucked back into my nightmare. He’s who warned me about this.” Just then, the bird flew down and landed on Sephie’s knee. He looked right at Sephie for a few moments before flying off again.

I had never seen anything like it before in my life. I glanced to Misha, who was speechless. I looked down at Sephie, her eyes who was still lost in a memory, her sweet smile on her face. She turned to look at me after a moment, questioning as she searched mine. I didn’t give her much time to question. I leaned down and kissed her. “You never cease to amaze me.

Chapter Ninety-Nine

Adrik

As we were finishing breakfast the next morning, Armando’s assistant walked in, looking completely panicked. He went to her immediately. “Giana, are you okay? What happened? You look terrified.”

“Sir, I went to the office this morning before coming here. I had forgotten the charger to my laptop yesterday and I don’t have a backup. I was late.” She looked at him sheepishly, clearing her throat. “As usual, sir. It was 8:15 when I turned onto the street in front of the building. Sir, the building. It.. it exploded.”

Armando cursed loudly. “Are you okay? How close were you? Did you get hurt?” he asked, checking her over.

“No, no, sir. I’m fine. I was still far enough away. I got out of there as fast as I could and came straight here.”

I asked, “are you sure none of your people went to the office this morning, Mando?”

He looked at me, a look of horror on his face. He immediately tumed to Giana, “we must call everyone to make sure everyone stayed home.” They left quickly, to make the necessary calls.

I leaned over to Sephie, whispering in her ear, “tell your father that we owe him one.” I kissed her cheek.

“No sh it,” she said, shocked.

I looked to Misha, who was equally as shocked, nodding a silent thank you. Were it not for those two, we might’ve been at the office this morning. The relief I felt that we were all safe was quickly replaced by anger. This was a direct attack on Armando, but I had a feeling it was also an attack on me. Giana hadn’t told us what she had found out yet, but I could almost guarantee that the lawyer was working for Lorenzo and Anthony.

Sephie looked to me, like she was reading my mind. “They know you’re still alive. They have to know.” I looked in her eyes, expecting to see her fear. Instead, her anger level was matching mine. “They tried to ki ll you. AGAIN.”

Armando walked back in with Giana, who was still visibly still shaken. She had her laptop in her hands. “Did she tell you she connected the lawyer to Lorenzo or Anthony or both?” I asked.

He nodded his head. “Just as we suspected. The lawyer must have told them that you were alive. And that Sephie is here. They must have known that my people connected them. All my people are loyal, but they had to have a tap on someone’s phone. I just ditched mine and Giana’s. All my people are safe. They know how to get in touch with me without the use of phones. Giana is going to stay here, in case they followed her,” he said as he looked at her. Given her expression, he clearly did not discuss that with her beforehand, but she didn’t protest.

Viktor looked at Armando. “Your people have been watching Lorenzo and Anthony. What’s their plan now? Clearly, they wanted to take us out this morning, but then what? What’s their next play?”

Ivan, stroking his goatee, said, “if it were me, I would use this as a distraction to leave. They know we’ll be looking for them here or in Sicily. But communication will be slower because you’ve been compromised. Until you find out where that leak or tap Is, information is going to be coming slower to us. They’re probably already on a plane to the city. That would be my move.”

I couldn’t say I disagreed with him. Getting back to the city has always been their goal. They might not have even waited to see if the explosion was successful before leaving. Either way, we would be dead or so distracted that they get a few days head start.

Armando said, “I’ll get in touch with Dario and Massimo. They’re still in the city, watching Salvadori. They can watch for Lorenzo and Anthony in the city.”

Sephie looked to me, Leaning in, she quietly asked “Dario and Massimo are the other two bosses that are loyal to you? Or those are the guys that took me?”

“Bosses. You know something?” I raised an eyebrow at her. I was beginning to rely on her random bits of information that always seemed invaluable later.

“You’re sure they’re loyal to you?” she asked.

“I believe so. They, like Armando, came to me immediately when Salvadori came to them.”

Armando added, “Dario would never side with Salvadori. They have bad blood between them. They can barely stand to be in the same room as each other. And Massimo is Dario’s childhood friend. He would never go against Dario.”

Sephie thought for a moment. “Dario is salt and pepper hair, but clean shaven?” she asked. I nodded. “He repeats things you say when he’s lying. He’ll repeat the question back to you, like he’s surprised you even asked him. He’s buying his brain time to come up with an answer. You’ll be able to tell if he’s lying to you over the phone that way. Massimo will be harder. He forgets to blink when he’s lying. He thinks if he maintains eye contact like a psycho that you’ll somehow be more apt to believe him. Massimo is one of the smoothest liars I’ve seen. It took me longer to pick up on his lack of blinking than the rest of them, which makes him more dangerous than the others, if you ask me. I wouldn’t trust that man.”

Armiando looked at his watch. “It’s still early there. I’ll give them a call now,” he said walking out of the room.

We sat in silence for a moment, all of us contemplating our next move. I agreed with Ivan. I think we should get back to the city as quickly as possible. I would feel better with Sephie at the penthouse where I knew she would be safe. I felt too exposed here. Armando was a gracious host, but he was a little too relaxed on his security. I secretly hoped this incident would fix that. I was also worried about them carrying out their original plan of unleashing chaos on the people of the city.

“Misha. What’s your opinion? Stay here or go back to the city as quickly as possible?” I asked, somewhat amused at the surprise on the kid’s face. After this morning, there was no way I wasn’t getting his opinion on our next move from here on out.

He thought for a minute, while we all waited for his answer. “City agree with Ivan. I think this morning was a distraction to give them cover to leave. If we get in touch with Armando’s people that have been watching them, I’d bet they lost them this morning.”

I nodded to him, agreeing with him. I looked to Viktor, Andrei, and Stephen. They all agreed that returning home was the best plan. Finally, I looked to Sephie, making sure she was also okay with the plan. She nodded slightly, but then turned to all the guys. “Will you guys make me a promise?” she asked, looking at Stephen first. “If you don’t pick them off from a rooftop. somewhere, can you keep them alive long enough for me to have a go at Anthony? That mo therfucker is starting to pi ss me off.”

Everyone laughed but Giana, who just looked mortified.

Plans were quickly made to leave early the next morning. I caught Viktor alone and asked him to have the bikes sent back as well. Once we were done with all of this, I was going to enjoy a long ride with Sephie.

Chapter One Hundred

Adrik

I woke to Sephle's fingers playing on my chest. I ran my fingers through her hair, causing her to snuggle closer to me. I held her close for a moment. Unfortunately, we didn't have ample time this morning. I ran my fingers over the naked skin of her back, feeling every scar that marked her. I was lost in my own thoughts about what she'd been through when I felt her head lift off my chest. She rested her chin on my chest, looking at me with still sleepy eyes. I smiled at her. She was adorable in the mornings, especially when she didn't want to wake up just yet. I felt a pang of guilt as I might have kept her awake too long last night, but I couldn't help myself. I was addicted.

"Good morning. Mostly," she said as she moved to hide her face in my chest.

I laughed, feeling her pain. I think we would both be sleeping on the plane. My hands still roaming on her back, trying to coax her awake.

"We have to get up so we can go back and get you all the sandwiches you can eat, solnishko," I whispered to her, kissing the top of her head.

She sat up immediately, climbing over me to get off the bed. She grabbed my pants from the night before and threw them at my head. As I pulled them off my head, she was pulling up her panties She walked back to the bed, climbing back on top of me, her smile wide across her face. I grabbed her and rolled over, so I was on top of her, loving her playful side.

"I think I might be jealous of Vinny," I said, my fingers lightly running over her neck down to her breasts.

"You should be. You definitely should be. I would offer to marry him too, but I feel like Andrei might try to hurt him. Vinny makes phenomenal sandwiches, but he's no fighter."

"I'll have to make sure I marry you first, then." I leaned down and kissed her lips, enjoying the surprise in her eyes. "For the sake of keeping the peace," I added, winking at her. She looked at ine for a moment, surprised, but there was a flash of something darker that I caught before she could hide it. She closed her eyes briefly, but when she opened them, it was gone and she was smiling, the colors in her unique eyes dancing in the early morning light.

She pulled me to her, kissing me passionately. As much as I wanted to rip those panties off her, we were on a time schedule this morning. I groaned into her mouth. "Sephie, we must go. It's a long flight back. We should get there as early as possible," I said as I kissed her one more time. "Or you're going to have to wait until tomorrow for your sandwich."

I felt her hands on my chest, pushing me off her as she giggled. "I can be ready in ten minutes. Fucking hurry up already!" She jumped off the bed again, grabbing clothes on her way to the bathroom.

I shook my head, laughing at her as I got up. I heard the shower come on. I waited until I heard the shower door open and 1 walked in the bathroom, enjoying the view. I had meant to let her shower by herself, but as soon as I saw her, I couldn't help myself. I joined her.

She turned toward me when she felt my hands on her hips. "You're wasting a lot of time ogling me," she said handing me the soap with an impish grin.

"That is not my fault, my love. That is entirely your fault for being so beautiful and worthy of being ogled."

She laughed, standing on her toes to kiss me. "I love you."

I grabbed her hips, pulling her to me, stepping back under the water. She gasped, trying to get free. "I can't get my bandage super wet or we'll have to change it!" I kept my grip on her, turning her so her bad hip was out of the water. She laughed, putting her hands on either side of my face, kissing me once more before she jumped out of the shower.

There might be something to Ivan's honey trick. Or else I really should be jealous of Vinny."

Armando had decided to not come back with us just yet. He wanted to find out as much information about his office building as he could before he left Italy. He would come to the city in a day or two after he had handled things. I was secretly relieved to have a break from him. I enjoyed Armando, but he didn't appreciate silence as much as the rest of us. It was exhausting after a while.

On the plane, we discussed possibilities of what Anthony and Lorenzo were planning. The question remained why Salvadori had gone along with their plan. He was a wealthy man now. Wealthier than he had ever been when my father was running the organization. Why would he want to go back to that? It didn't make sense.

"Before the night we met, how involved were you in the organization?" Sephie asked me. "I mean, they had been coming every month for over a couple of years before I ever saw you, or even heard you existed. I thought the other 6 bosses were the only ones in the city and I have to say I was privy to more knowledge about your organization than most people."

Viktor chuckled. "That was mostly my fault, sestrichka. He was in Turkey trying to get me out of a Syrian prison for much of that time."

"I'm sorry, what? You were in a Syrian prison? What did you do to land yourself in a Syrian prison?" she asked, completely surprised.

"Vengeance is not always as worth it as you think it will be. You end up making mistakes that can get you thrown into Syrian prisons," he said, almost embarrassed.

"What kind of mistakes? Like oops I burnt the darn muffins? Or more like oh fuck I didn't mean to kill that guy?"

He laughed, hanging his head. "Eh, more like I did mean to kill that guy. I just didn't mean to get caught."

"Viktor. How many times have I told you, we don't murder people in broad daylight? We wait for the darkness to conceal us.

Ivan laughed. "I think that's a lesson he has for sure learned now."

"How did you guys get him out of the Syrian prison? I'm guessing you don't just ask nicely for him to be released," she asked, now even more curious.

Misha said, "that depends on your definition of 'nice,' gazelle. I think we asked very nicely."

She looked to each of them as they laughed, then turned to me, hoping I would fill in the details. I couldn't help but smile at her enthusiasm for this story. "We might've blown a hole in the wall of the prison to get him out. You'd be surprised at how fast he can run when he needs to," I said, nodding to Viktor. Viktor's deep laugh echoed in the plane.

"I think I would pay to see that," Sephie said, laughing along with all of us. I watched each of the guys enjoying her interest in our "adventures" as well as the visible relief on their faces that she wasn't disturbed by our actions. None of us were used to being able to be so open about these things with anyone, really, much less a love interest. She was the first to know many things about us, which meant we all trusted her completely.

"So, you blew up a Syrian prison and Viktor set the new land speed record, then what did you do? Go to Disney World? Euro Disney?"

Andrei pointed to me, exclaiming, "I TOLD YOU IT WAS A GOOD IDEA!"

That caused another round of laughter from all of us. We ended up laughing so hard we were crying.

Finally, Ivan got control of himself enough to answer Sephie's question. "We laid low for a few months. Viktor was in a bad spot from his months in that fine institution. He needed time to recover. We spent time in Eastern Europe in various places. We had Just returned to the city a few days before we came to the meeting at the restaurant and met you."

She laughed. "You recover well, Viktor. I still remember being shocked when you and Andrei walked in the front door of the restaurant."

"We remember too. You made it very difficult to not laugh," Andrei said, grinning at her.

"I have that effect on people," she said, flipping her braid over her shoulder. She leaned back against me, pulling her knees up on the couch, leaning them against my legs. I put my arm around her, pulling her close. "I'm glad you guys know how to ask nicely and got him out," she said, smiling thoughtfully.

"We're a family, solnishko. We don't leave family behind," I said kissing her temple.

Andrei, looking serious, asked, "you don't think we're monsters after hearing these things?" The other guys looked at her, curious as to her answer as well. I knew what they were thinking. It was tough to share this part of our lives with anyone.

She smiled at him, in her perfect way. "Bubba. You think because you can freely walk in the dark that it makes you a monster?" He shrugged his shoulders. "No, Bubba. You're the opposite of a monster, simply because you don't give in to the darkness. It makes you dangerous, sure. Because you've conquered your darkness. Tamed it, even. You each have such a strong light in you, despite the darkness coming for you more times than you can remember, most likely. Never forget, that the darkness can be a place where greatness is created too."

I felt the tears welling up in my eyes and I didn't have to look at the rest of them to know they were in the same state as me. I pulled her closer to me, wrapping my other arm around her. I rested my head on hers, because I couldn't believe how much I loved her in that moment, and I didn't want the guys to see the tears threatening to fall from my eyes. My breath caught as I inhaled, thinking about everything that had happened and how lucky I was to have her in my arms right now

Chapter One Hundred One

Adrik

With the time difference, we landed in the city in the early afternoon. Plenty of time to get Vinny's. I smiled to myself, still amazed at Sephie's reaction to us on the plane. I knew it before today, but I could clearly see that each of them loved her almost as much as I did. We would never be the same without her.

As we got everything from the plane, I noticed that her limp was barely noticeable today. Ivan caught me watching her as he loaded bags into the SUVs. "Her limp is better today," he said, a sly smirk on his face.

I cut my eyes to him. "I was just thinking that. She was practically jumping around the bedroom this morning. I just don't know if she's that excited to get a sandwich or if she really feels better today."

"Let's get her a sandwich and then we'll see if the limp comes back. Process of elimination," he laughed.

"Solid plan." I had to admit that I was also looking forward to stopping by Vinny's. We'd find out more about her hip tonight when we changed the bandage. I was hopeful that it wasn't just her excitement over her favorite sandwich.

We were greeted by Vinny as we walked in the sandwich shop. "Boss! I've never been happier to see you! I told them you weren't really gone! And Miss Sephie! You've never looked more beautiful, amora."

"You're a sight for sore eyes, Vinny. I can't even begin to tell you how happy you're making me right now," she said as he walked to her, embracing her in one of his hugs. I remember her apprehension the first time he hugged her. She was now completely at ease with him. I might still be slightly jealous of him, but I couldn't help but love the way everyone loved her.

"You want the usual, bella?" he asked, walking back behind the counter.

"You know me so well, Vinny," she grinned at him.

Misha leaned into her shoulder. "We'll have to come back everyday this week, so I can make good on that promise."

"You ain't gotta ask me twice," she said dryly.

Once we were all sufficiently stuffed, we went to the penthouse. I had a few things work-related to take care of that afternoon. I was hoping that Sephie would want to come with me. I could use her opinion, for one. I had also gotten used to always being with her and the thought of being away from her right now did not sit well with me.

After the guys got off the elevator at their floor, I pulled her to nie. "How are you? Are you happy now that you've had at least one sandwich? Are you tired?"

"My stomach is so happy right now, but I'm not that tired. What do you need?" she asked, placing her hands on my chest.

"I need to meet with Dario and Massimo this afternoon. I was hoping I could talk you into coming with me," I said leaning down to kiss her lips. "We can go back to Vinny's after," I smiled against her lips.

"I would do it even without the offer of more Vinny's," she said as the doors to the elevator opened. "I've become very accustomed to being with you the entire day. I'm not ready to give that up yet." She turned to leave the elevator, her hand finding mine. I felt that pull in my chest as I realized she had read my mind yet again.

Viktor let Dario and Massimo into my office that afternoon. They were surprised to see Sephle sitting on the edge of my desk.

"Are we interrupting, Boss? We can come back later," Dario asked. Sephie stood up and moved behind my chair, sitting on the cabinets behind my desk.

"She stays." I motioned for them to sit. Viktor caught her eye before leaving, winking at her. She grinned at him.

"Gentlemen. Tell me what's happened in my absence," I said, sitting in my chair.

They both looked like they were scared to speak in front of Sephie Shifting uneasily in their chairs, the silence lasted for an uncomfortable amount of time.

"Now you're worried about speaking in front of me? I'm sorry, should I serve you a drink so you'll think less of me and feel more comfortable talking then?" she asked. I could hear the anger just below the surface in her voice. I was struggling not to smile in front of them. I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing. I knew that Viktor and Ivan were enjoying this just outside the door. They could hear everything, as I had the intercom on. "You boys are a little late to that party, considering I know where the bodies are buried."

Both cursed under their breath. I very much enjoyed the looks on their faces. I waited for one of them to speak. Massimo was the first to break the silence. Dario still looked too stunned to speak.

"Boss, forgive us. We didn't know."

"Clearly," Sephie said quietly.

Massimo continued. "Salvadori has been mostly quiet since you've been gone. We did have a chance to speak with Vito. It doesn't make sense that he's siding with Sal. Vito is an odd man, but he's usually pretty neutral. Sal is holding something over him, but we don't know what. We've got guys looking into it. If we can get Vito to abandon Sal, that will make him weaker. Vito might not be the strongest boss, but he's got great men working for him. We think Sal is after Vito's men more than Vito."

I counted the number of times Massimo blinked while he was talking. So far, so good.

Dario finally composed himself enough to speak. "We got word that Anthony and Lorenzo were supposedly coming to the city, the day before you got back, Boss. However, they changed their flight plans at the last second. They flew to an airport further south, refueled, then kept flying south. We can't be sure, but we're thinking they're meeting with the Colombians."

This was a disturbing twist. I had a good relationship with the Colombians. We had a very lucrative deal worked out. It was concerning that they would meet with Anthony and Lorenzo without consulting me first, but they might be under the impression that I'm still dead. Even still, I wasn't sure how far Anthony and Lorenzo would get with the Colombians. Interesting.

"Why do you think they're meeting with the Colombians?" I asked.

"Why do I think they're meeting with the Colombians?" Dario asked. I raised my eyebrow, waiting for him to answer. "I'm not sure, sir. The existing deal with the Colombians is a beneficial one. None of us have a reason to meet with the Colombians," he said. Interesting.

I looked to Massimo, expecting him to answer, waiting to count the number of times he blinked when he answered. "I'm not sure either, sir. I can't imagine why they would need to meet with the Colombians." Not a single blink.

Have you spoken with Armando?" I asked Massimo, trying to see if I could get him to blink more than anything.

"Not for a few days, no," he said, without blinking. I looked to Dario, who simply shook his head no.

I stood up, "gentlemen. You will tell me when you hear anything on Anthony and Lorenzo." Viktor opened the door, waiting for them to exit my office. He and Ivan would escort them out and come back. Once the door was sh ut again, I paced the floor.

Sephie was still sitting on the cabinet, watching me. My anger was threatening to come to the surface. It appeared that Armando was the only one I could trust at the moment, and he was the only one not in the city. I was suddenly worried for his safety. I ran my hand through my hair, exhaling.

"Do you think Armando is safe? I suddenly feel like he should've come back with us," Sephie said, still sitting on the cabinet,

I looked at her, somewhat stunned. "How do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"You just read my mind. Again."

She smiled, shrugging her shoulders. "It's a gift."

Viktor and Ivan walked into the office and sat down in the chairs across from my desk, both looking at Sephie with smirks on their faces.

"What? They were rude first," she said, crossing her arms over her chest.

Both of them just shook their heads, laughing. She did a great job of keeping us all entertained.

Viktor looked to me. "We couldn't see, but I'm guessing they were lying at the end there? At least about talking to Armando."

I nodded my head. "I'm worried for Armando's safety now. Sephie just said she thinks he should've come back with us. We need to contact him immediately and get him here. He never thinks he needs security. He's too exposed there."

Ivan nodded his head. "Agreed. A couple of us could go back and get him. If Dario and Massimo are lying, then Armando is the only one you can trust at this point. You need him here."

"Get a fresh pilot and you two get back there. I'll call him and let him know you're coming. Take Andrei if you need to," I said.

"What about the Colombians?" Viktor asked.

"I have a good relationship with the Colombians, but they might be under the impression that I'm dead. One call will fix that, but I want to give them time to meet with Anthony and Lorenzo first, if that is indeed where they're going. I want to know what their next play is."

Both Ivan and Viktor nodded. I heard Sephie say, "diabolical" quietly behind me. I could tell she was smiling when she said it, without looking at her. Ivan winked at her, grinning.

Chapter One Hundred Two

Sephie

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Viktor and Ivan decided to leave Andrei with us. They felt we might need him more than they did. They were only home for a few hours before they were back on the jet flying back to get Armando.

That night, as Adrik and I enjoyed time alone in the penthouse, I asked him, "do you think we could go to the house until Viktor and Ivan get back? I mean, it's fine if you think we should stay here. It would just be nice if I could go outside without worrying about dying. For at least a day or two."

He looked thoughtful for a moment, as he pulled my legs into his lap. My road rash was getting much better, so he could run his hands over my body without causing me more pain. I hadn't realized how much I had missed that. His hands slowly ran up my legs, then back down. "I don't see why that would be a problem, my love. We can ask Misha what he thinks. I know Andrei would like to go back to the house to see where things stand with Tori." He looked over at me, with a devilish grin on his face. and added, "although I have to say I love you being able to wear nothing but my shirt around the entire penthouse without worrying about anyone else seeing."

"Point for the penthouse. It's also much closer to Vinny's. Okay, two points for the penthouse. But it's very peoplely here, where it's not at the house. So, one point for the house, two for the penthouse. So far, the penthouse is winning."

"We can get Vinny's, even at the house, solnishko," he said laughing. "That shouldn't be a deciding factor. I would argue that it's a point for the house because you won't be able to physically go to Vinny's. I've decided I'm jealous of him," he tried to look. at me seriously, but failed miserably. I immediately laughed, as I set up and climbed into his lap, straddling him.

"Oh, Adrik," I said as melodramatically as I could, "you have no reason to be jealous." I was still smiling, but added, "you have my heart. Vinny might have my stomach, but we both know she's easily bought. My heart, on the other hand, beats only for you."

I felt his hands slide under his shirt to my lower back, pulling me closer to him. He looked surprised at my answer to his statement, said completely in jest. He looked me in the eyes, this time searching my eyes for what he was worried he was going to find. I smiled at him, knowing what he was doing, and held his gaze, allowing him to read any part of my soul he wished to. I placed my hands on his shoulders, my hands lightly running up his neck to his hair. He inhaled, smiling at me. "Every time I think I couldn't possibly love you any more, you always prove me wrong." He reached up, his hands in my hair, pulling me down to kiss me gently. "And I hope you never, ever stop proving me wrong," he said smiling against my lips.

The next morning, in the gym, Adrik asked Misha what his thoughts were about going to the house until Viktor and Ivan got back. He felt like it was a good decision, but poor Andrei looked terrified. That would mean he would have to face Tori. He still hadn't called her because he was afraid of her reaction.

"You're going to have to face her at some point, Bubba," I said, trying hard not to laugh at his petrified expression.

"I think the fact that you don't want to call her should tell you everything you need to know," Stephen said. That guy was always so quiet, but he could come out with serious wisdom randomly.

Misha nodded his head, agreeing with Stephen. Adrik walked over, still breathing hard from lifting something heavy repeatedly. Da mmit, he's sexy. "Everyone needs to learn what they will and what they won't put up with in a relationship. This is Andrei's learning experience. He's either going to learn what he wants or what he doesn't want from Tori." Da mmit, he's even sexier when he says such intelligent things. He caught me ogling him and smirked at me,

Andrei, still looking mostly terrified, said, "I might need backup to Jace her the first time."

I walked over to the bench he was sitting on, leaning over his back with my arms around his neck. "I will protect you from the scary girl, Bubba. I planted a kiss on his cheek, then Immediately regretted it. "Ugh, sweaty. Why did I think that would be a good Idea? I wiped my mo uth on his shirt, laughing at his objection.

A few hours later, we were on our way to the house. A very nervous Andrei in the driver's seat of the SUV Adrik and I were in. I looked to Adrik, a devilish grin on my face, talking loud enough that I was sure that Andrel could hear me, "do you think we should let Andrei go in first? Have a few moments alone with Tori before we come in and ruin his alone time?"

I noticed Andrei's grip on the steering wheel tighten, as well as his jaw clench. Adrik whispered into my car, "you're a little evil, solnishko," then said louder, "I think that would be the polite thing to do. I know I would want a few moments alone with you if I hadn't seen you for a few weeks."

Andrei exhaled, his hand running through his short sandy blonde hair. Poor guy was going to have a heart attack before we ever made it to the house…

After we parked in front of the house, we all stepped out of the vehicles. Misha and Stephen walked back toward us, as they were in the vehicle ahead of us. "Misha, don't you think we should let Andrei go in first to have a minute alone with Tori before we're all there, up in his business?" I asked, as innocently as I could, but winking at him.

Misha immediately understood the assignment. "I was actually going to suggest that, gazelle. I think it's only fair."

Andrei looked from Misha to me to Adrik to Stephen. "I ha te all of you."

Misha and I looked at each other, then said in unison, "we know."

Andrei walked up the steps to the front door, his head hung low like he was being punished. He was so nervous; I was starting to feel bad for him. Before he opened the front door, I yelled, "if we hear yelling, we'll come save you."

He didn't even look back, he just flipped me the bird as he walked in the house. We all stood in the driveway, taking serious enjoyment from his predicament. It was quiet for a few minutes and then he walked back through the front door, looking completely relieved.

"She's not here right now. She went to the store to restock since she found out we were coming today." He exhaled, visibly looking like he'd barely escaped doom.

We all walked up the steps, still enjoying his situation a little too much. I slid my arm through one of his, pretending like I was talking into a microphone. "You've escaped death for now, Andrei. What are you going to do now?"

"I'm going to Disney World!" he said, playing along like he was talking into my pretend microphone.

"Who wants to go for a really long walk in like ten minutes?" I asked, grinning at him.

"Oh, me. Please take me," he said, laughing.

Chapter One Hundred Three

Sephie

I ran upstairs and threw on a heavier long-sleeve shirt. The weather was in that weird time of year where you had to add and subtract layers of clothing periodically throughout the day. There was more of a breeze at the house, so it felt cooler. I didn't want to make Andrei have to give me his shirt while we were avoiding the house…

Misha decided to come too. Adrik slid his arm around my waist, leaning down to my ear, "I'd rather have you all to myself later. I'll be in my office when you get back." He spun me around to face him, planting a kiss on my lips. It was just enough to get my mind thinking about what his definition of "having me all to himself later" meant.

The three of us set out for an adventure, far, far away from the house and the evil stepmother evil chef? Seems accurate the evil chef that lived there. I always enjoyed their company, but I w just happy to be able to go for a walk. Ivan was a genius. My hip felt better than it had since the night of the ball. My limp was barely noticeable now and the dull ache that had started was now gone too. When Adrik took the bandage off last night, he was surprised at how good it looked. It was no longer red around the edges and was already showing signs of healing.

They both noticed I was walking better, as we walked toward the rdens, and I skipped to get a closer sniff of one of the roses.

"Your hip must be feeling better, spider monkey." Andrei had a broad smile on his face. I knew they were all still struggling with what happened, so seeing me feel better also made them feel better.

"Ivan is a genius. Maybe an evil genius, I don't know. But a genius, nonetheless. It does feel better than it's felt since, you know, I tried to ki ll myself by jumping out of a moving vehicle. 0/10, by the way. Do not recommend."

Misha laughed, shaking his head. "You're so much like us, it's scary

I squinted my eyes at him, putting my hands on my hips. "I'm going to need some clarification on that one, my adorable Russian guardian."

His cheeks blushed slightly, his handsome smile stretching across his face. "You have a dark sense of humor about cheating death like we do."

"Well, what's the fun of cheating death if you can't laugh about it? I asked.

They laughed, but both were thoughtful. Andrei looked to me as w walked closer to the forest trail. "Ivan was right, you know. You're really making it difficult for any other girl to have a chance with us."

"We're going to compare everyone to you from now on." Misha added.

"I mean, no pressure there," I said, scoffing.

"We don't mean it as a bad thing, gazelle. You've just showed us how good it can be," Misha said, slinging his arm over my shoulders as we walked. I wrapped an arm around his waist, nearin; the forest trail.

I sighed. "It's not going to be easy for you. The more you accept yourselves and truly own who you are, you're going to attract all kinds of people who want a taste of what you have to offer. But most people just want to take from you, without ever giving in return. You have to wait for that one special person, or in my case, six of you, that give back just as much as they take. They're out there, but you're going to have to eliminate…okay, bad choice of word right there. I did not mean eliminate literally," I said, laughing. "You're going to have to weed out the boil ones to find your special one." I thought for a minute, then added, "it might not be as difficult for you guys. Your murderous as when you're working will keep a lot of them away."

They both laughed. "We don't really look that mean, do we?" Andrul asked.

"Well, you two look nicer. Viktor and Ivan are slightly more intimidating. They smile less than you two. Viktor is easier to win over while Ivan is the toughest n ut to crack I've ever met. Stephen is the wild card. He's so quiet that you're not sure if he's Just a really nice guy or if he is plotting your murder at any given mag tnt."

We came into the clearing by the lake. The wildflowers were all fading with the beginning of Fall, but they were still eerily beautiful. The lake was calm and clear, giving us a clear mirror image of the fluffy wh ite clo uds in the sky. I took in the scene, not realizing just how much I had missed this place. It was one of Adrik's favorite places on the property, but it was also one of mine. They both knew my favorite spot to sit by the lake and healed straight for it. We all sat down, silently enjoying the scenery, the quiet, the moment.

We sat for a long time in silence, both guys looking like they were lost in thought. Andrei picked up a rock and chucked it in the water. "Did you know right away that Boss was the one for you? Like was it love at first sight?

I smiled, thinking back to that first night. "I don't know if I would phrase it exactly like that. You and Viktor walked in and I'm sure my eyes went wide. You're both giant, very attractive men, bil I felt nervous looking at you both. Then Adrik stepped inside the door so I could see him and there was like a weird calm that came over me. There's always this pull toward him when I see him. I felt that right away, for sure, but I wouldn't say that recognized it as love right away."

I

"He feels that pull when he's around you. He can't stay away from you. It's so different from how he's always been with his past girlfriends," Misha said. "They were always clinging to him and he would just look like he was miserable and wanted to get away from them," he said, laughing at the memory. I found the me ntal image of him being desperate to get away from his past girlfriends amusing.

"We all feel it, though, just to a lesser extent. We all want to be artund you," Andrei said. "You're like a desert oasis for us."

"Don't you dare compare me in any way to a camel."

Chapter One Hundred Four

Sephie

We sat by the lake for a while longer. I was starting to get sore from sitting on the ground, so I suggested we head back to the house. “I know you don’t want to, Bubba. I promise, for real this time, I won’t leave you alone if you don’t want me to.”

He stood up and offered me his hand, pulling me up. Probably shouldn’t have sat like that for so long. I put my hand on my hip. pressing just above the wound. It wasn’t excruciating this time, but I could feel it.

Misha said, “we sat for too long. Your hip doesn’t like it when we sit for too long.”

“Ugh, I think you’re right. I’ll be okay. I just need to walk,” I said limping toward the direction of the house.

“I can give you a ride back to the house, spider monkey,” Andrei said, his eyebrow raised.

I laughed. “Are you trying to make Tori want to k ill me while I’m sleeping?”

“I can do it. She can’t say anything about me giving you a ride,” Misha offered.

“I think I should walk for a minute first. If it doesn’t go away, I’ll take you up on it,” I said, smiling at him. Sometimes I felt guilty at how they all liked to spoil me in their own ways. “But give me your arm in the meantime. That helps.” Misha was immediately next to me, offering me his arm to lean on as we walked slowly back to the house.

I made it to the edge of the forest and then relented. “Okay, Misha, I’m taking you up on the offer. It’s not getting any better.”

He grinned down at me, stepping in front of me. He squatted down to make it easier for me to get on his back. I looked over my shoulder at Andrei. “Would you mind, Bubba?” He picked me up and I wrapped my legs around Misha’s waist, my arms around his neck. He bounced me higher to the right spot and set off toward the house.

We were laughing at du mb jokes as we walked into the kitchen. Toji had her back to us, getting something out of the refrigerator. We all stopped and waited for her to turn around. When she did, she gasped. Apparently, she hadn’t heard us come inside. She stood, stunned, for a moment. Andrei spoke first. I’m so proud of him.

“Hi,” he said. He was unsure whether he should go to her or not. I couldn’t blame him. I couldn’t tell if she wanted him to come to her or not. Misha still had a hold of my legs and squeezed them both, holding onto me in sympathy for the awkwardness of the situation. I was trying so hard not to laugh. I knew it was going to pi ss her off if I did. I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing.

She smiled tightly at all of us. “I see you’re all still alive,” she said, slamming the vegetables in her hand down on the counter. 1 flinched. Misha squeezed my legs again, whispering, “I’ll protect you, gazelle.” I hugged his neck a little tighter.

Andrei walked closer to her, clearly nervous. “I wanted to tell you, Tori, but I couldn’t. We had to go no contact. It was as much for your safety as it was for ours.”

Tort picked up a knife to cut up the vegetables she had just abused on the counter. Well, this isn’t going to end well. She chopped a few pieces of broccoli like that particular head of broccoli had killed her entire family. She stopped and looked at him, “I’m sure you stayed in contact with her though, right? I mean, she’s the special one.” I felt Misha tense at her words. This was unexpected.

Andrei, trying to diffuse the situation, said, “she was with us, yes, liut it’s not what you think.”

Tori was back to chopping the broccoli as savagely as she could. I was starting to worry about the safety of her fingers at this point, “I think I understand the situation perfectly, given that you’re all still carting her around like a go ddamn princess that can’t be bothered to walk on her own.” Misha tapped my legs as he squatted down, to indicate that he was going to put me down. I stood up as he walked closer to Tori. Andrei moved closer to me, pushing me partially behind him.

“You need to check your fu cking attitude, lady. You have no idea what happened when we were gone. Andrei might not want to make you angry, but I don’t give a fu ck. You can’t see the wounds on Sephie because she’s wearing long sleeves and pants, but it was not a fu cking vacation while we were gone. She almost died. But even if we were on fu cking vacation, you don’t get to ever refer to her like that again. She’s Boss’s girlfriend and you will treat her with respect, or you will leave this house. And aside from that, she’s our little sister, and don’t think for one minute we will allow you to speak about her in that way. I don’t care how angry you are with us, with Andrei; you have no right to talk about Sephie like that. Do it again and I’ll gladly drag you to the front gates so you can leave.”

Ugh. Why are girls so complicated, especially when it comes to me? I was mostly hiding behind Andrei at this point. I’d been in similar situations with Max so many times that I knew what was coming next. She was going to force an ultimatum on Andrei. With Max, it usually meant that he would disappear for a few weeks, and I would only see him at work. He would always break up with them and come back to hang out with me. He never apologized for it, but honestly, I just expected it to happen each time, so I didn’t see the need for an apology.

She looked stunned at Misha’s words, but she kept violently chopping the broccoli. Misha turned his back to her, walking back. to me. His face was red with his anger, but he smiled at me hiding behind Andrei. “Come, let’s go find Boss,” he said offering his arm to me. I glanced at Tori. She glanced up, her gaze throwing daggers my way. I held her gaze until she looked down. I glanced up at Andrei.

“You okay, Bubba?”

“Yeah, I’m good. Let’s go find Boss,” he said, turning to walk out of the kitchen. We heard her still trying to murder the broccoli as we left the kitchen.

As we walked up the stairs, I said, “that was SO much worse than I thought it was going to be.”

“No sh it,” they both said at the same time, causing us to giggle.

“Wait, shhh… You can still hear her murdering the broccoli. That’s crimes against cruciferous vegetables right there,” I said. We all laughed, probably louder than we should have, but we needed a stress relief after that hot mess

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Chapter One Hundred Five

Sephie

As we walked into Adrik's office, he was smirking. "What trouble Jive you three gotten into now?" He opened his arts for me to come to him. I saw him frown as he noticed my limp was back, Misha tried to smooth it over. "We sat by the lake for too long. Her hip doesn't like it when she sits for too long."

Adrik's eyebrows furrowed, but he said nothing. He pulled me onto his lap, sliding his hands over my legs. "Now, what were you all laughing about? Have you seen Tori yet?"

Andrei sighed. "Oh yeah," he looked at Adrik, his eyes wide. "It weit even worse than what we were thinking She's not only mad at me, she's mad at Sephie for being with us. Boss, you need to know what she said."

I interrupted him, "Bubba, it's fine. She's just mad. She'll eventually get over it and it'll be fine." I felt Adrik tense.

Misha argued, "No, Sephie. I agree with Andrei. He needs to know what she said."

I groaned, pinching the bridge of my nose. Andrei proceeded to tell Adrik what had happened, what Tori said, and then what Misha said to Tori. I knew he was mad, but he looked at Misha with a smile on his face. "Well done, kid. I couldn't have said it better." He was quiet for a moment, his hand running up and down my back. Normally I would've loved this, but I knew he was trying to keep himself calm.

He looked to Andrei. "After this, are you still interested in pursuing a relationship with her?"

Andrei didn't have to think about his answer. He emphatically shook his head no. "Not in the slightest, Boss. This is going to happen again, and I won't allow it."

Adrik nodded, inhaling deeply. He stood up, with me in his arms. He kissed my cheek before gently setting me down. "I want you to lie down for a while. I think you overdid it with your hip. I'll be back in a few minutes. Andrei, with me. Misha, stay here." They walked quickly out of his office.

I couldn't help but smile at the situation. "I love how he's so calm with us in here, like he's not feeling all murdery and shit on the inside right now."

Misha laughed. "I want to sneak down to the kitchen so I can hear what's going on."

"Whatever it is, you know it won't be pretty. I just hope they take her knife away from her first." I limped over to the couch. lying down. I exhaled, mumbling, "ahh, sometimes I hate it when he's right about literally everything." It felt good to lie down.. Maybe I did overdo it with the long walk, but it was worth it. Maybe it was needed to fully show us the extent of Tarl's anger.

After a few minutes, Adrik returned without Andrei. My eyes went wide, "did she kill Andrei?" He smirked, but shook his head no. He walked to the couch, pulling me up. He sat and pulled me back down to rest my head in his lap. His hands immediately went to my hair. He looked at me for a moment, his eyes smiling at me.

He sighed. "Tori will no longer be working here." He looked from me to Misha. I glanced at Misha, shocked. He did not look as shocked as I was. He looked thoughtful.

"I think that was the best decision, Boss. Who wants to order takeput?" he said, grinning,

I looked up at Adrik, still shocked. "You fired her? For that? She was just angry."

Misha coughed. "She was more than angry, Sephle. She's always been Jealous of you. It's clear as day to all of us,"

Adrik twirled one of my curls around his finger. "That's the thing about anger, solnishko. What Is said in anger is usually brutal honesty. She just revealed how she really feels about you. I will not tolerate that kind of disrespect of you."

My mouth fell open. I was so shocked at their response. "How does Andrei feel about this?"

You can ask him when he gets back from escorting her off the property," he said, that sly smirk on his face. "Why is this so difficult for you?" his fingers lightly tracing over my face and neck

"I… Well… I don't know. I mean, this happened all the time with Max, But he would choose the other girls over me every time. He'd disappear for a few weeks, then he'd be back once he broke up with them."

"I told you, Sephie. Your friend is not a smart man," his smirk turning into a small smile.

Misha, sitting on one of the cabinets, lamented, "Ivan is gonna be so happy when they get back. He hated Tori. Even before her and Andrei got together." He laughed. "He would purposely be extra grumpy around her because he knew she was terrified of him."

Adrik smiled. "Ivan has always been a good judge of my previous girlfriends. He was always the first one to see their other sides."

"His demons pull their demons out for the world to see. He's very good at that. He just doesn't always realize that his demons work for him now, instead of against him," I said.

Misha cursed under his breath. I looked at his shocked face. "What?" I asked.

"I've never heard him described that way. It's perfect."

"Shall we send for Vinny's tonight? I have a meeting next week that you're going to need to be present for. I need to make sure you're paid up for it," Adrik said, grinning.

"I think Andrei needs to pick his breakup dinner," I said, laughing. It's the least I can do for wrecking his relationship status."

Adrik clicked his tongue. "You didn't wreck anything, solnishko. You saved him."

Andrei came to the office after almost an hour. I was still lying with my head in Adrik's lap, his hands still running through my hair. Misha was still sitting on the cabinet. We were talking about fandom things, wondering aloud where exactly Viktor and Ivan were in their journey across the ocean, while listening for screaming from downstairs.

I was expecting him to look sad, but truthfully, he looked quite happy about his situation.

"Bubba, you don't look as sad as I was expecting you to look."

He sighed, as he sat in one of the chairs across from the couch. "I'm not sad at all, spider monkey. This has been building for a -while. She's always been jealous of you. Like, weirdly so."

Misha snapped his fingers, pointing at me. "Told you."

"Why would she be jealous of me? I'm the one who got you two talking!"

"I don't know. Like I said, it was weird. It never mattered how much I reassured her there was no reason to be jealous, she was still jealous. Like me telling her there was no reason to be jealous actually made her more jealous. I never understood," Andrel said, rubbing his face with his hands.

"Why are women so complicated?" I groaned.

"I'm fairly sure if you could find the answer to that question, you would also be able to solve all of the world's problems," Andrei said laughing. "But first, let's order takeout since we just got rid of our chef."

"Are you sure you don't want some of that incredibly finely murdered…. chopped broccoli downstairs?" I asked, turning my head to smile at him.

He looked at me, astonished, "I have never seen vegetables so abused."

Misha laughed, "Ivan, Viktor, and Stephen are going to be mad they missed this."

I got up from the couch and walked over to Andrei. I leaned on his back, hugging his neck. "I still love you, Bubba. Even if she was pretending that head of broccoli was your face and my face."

He patted my arms, looking up at me. "Yeah, I'm not sure which one of us she hates the most right now."

I went back to the couch. As my head rested on Adrik's lap, I said, "Ivan. He's still on top."

Chapter One Hundred Six

Sephie

That night, Adrik was in the closet. I was lost in my thoughts, sitting on the edge of the bed. I didn't notice him walk into the bedroom, shirtless. I felt his warm hand on my cheek, his thumb rubbing gently. "What are you thinking about, solnishko?"

"This whole thing with Tori. I feel bad she got fired. She probably thinks I told you to do it." My eyebrows creased as I thought about how much she likely hated me now.

Adrik clicked his tongue. "Persephone. You're used to being tossed aside for a good lay." He put his hands on either side of my face, leaning down to look me in the eyes. He had a devilish sparkle to his deep blue eyes. "You are my good lay. I'm choosing you over everyone. Every time. Until my last breath." He smirked at me as he pressed his lips to mine.

I couldn't help but smile against his kiss. "I must be a pretty da mn good lay, in that case," I said, laughing.

"The best," he said, kissing me once more. He stood up, walking to the bathroom. "So good, in fact, that it's all I think about all day long."

"You're not the only one," I mumbled under my breath. I remembered I had taken some very skimpy lingerie from Armando's ex-girlfriend's clothing shop in his house. I glanced toward the bathroom. He was brushing his teeth, so I ran to the closet as quietly as I could to change into it.

If he can't stop thinking about me all day, I might as well give him something new to think about.

I waited in the closet until I heard him come out of the bathroom. I heard him turn on the lamp by the bed and saw the overhead light go off. I knew he'd be on his way back to the bed, st I walked slowly from the closet. My heart was racing like he'd never seen me na ked. He looked at me and stopped dead in his tracks. I heard him curse under his breath. He just stood in the same spot, looking me up and down as I walked toward him. I was trying to not limp as best I could, so slower was easier, which just so happened to add to the effect I was going for.

He looked down, then ran his hand through his hair. His eyes were back on me instantly. I smiled at him, chewing on my bottom lip to help calm my racing heartbeat. He closed the short distance between us in an instant. His arms were immediately around me, his lips on mine like he couldn't get enough of me. I hope he never does.

He broke the kiss, looking down at my wardrobe choice once more. He spun me around, cursing again when he saw my a ss.

"You know I'm going to rip this off you, right?"

1 giggled. "I was hoping so, yes." He groaned against my neck, his Hands roaming down my back. He hooked his thumbs in the flimsy material and easily ripped it. He threw it behind him, making quick work of what was left of it. He wrapped his arms tight around me, bending down to pick me up. I wrapped my legs around him, my arms around his shoulders. His lips desperately found mine, his tongue exploring every inch of my mo uth. His arms remained tight around me, like he had missed holding me tightly just as much as I missed him holding me tightly. In that moment, I never wanted him to let me go.

He turned and walked the few steps to the bed, bending down and laying me on the bed. He quickly got rid of his pants as 1 scooted up the bed to make room for him. The look on his face when he slowly climbed on the bed, kissing and running his hands up my legs was pure lust. It made me want him inside me right then. My hip was still aching from earlier, but I didn't want him to know. I sat up, pushing him onto his back. I leaned down to kiss him, straddling him. I could feel his hard co ck between my legs, turning me on even more. I sat up, pulling him up with me. He wrapped his arms around my waist, holding me higher so he could position himself. I felt him slide slowly inside me, grabbing his shoulders to steady myself at the intense pleasure 1 felt every time he entered me. I exhaled loudly, closing hy eyes, enjoying the feeling.

He whispered against my neck, "I love when you want this position. I love being able to watch you get lost in the feeling," His arms were once again tight around me as I pushed my hips down and into him harder. I pressed my body to his, my lips crashing into his. The last time we did this, I was still hurt, which forced him to hold back. Now, I was much better, and he didn't have to hold back as much. His lips were on my neck, kissing their way down to my collarbone. He bit my neck at the same time he bucked his hips into mine, causing me to moan loudly.

He exhaled. "I missed you not having to be quiet, solnishko. I love hearing you moan for me." He thrust into me again, once ugain causing a moan to escape. He increased his rhythm slightly. My whole body was nothing but a wave of pleasure. I closed my eyes, my hands on his shoulders, and relished in feeling nothing but him. I felt my body get closer to the edge. I grabbed his shoulders Lighter. He increased his thrusting, holding me even tighter, as I started to orgasm. He continued his unrelenting rhythm, drawing out my orgasm once again. Every time I thought was done, it would start again. I leaned back slightly, pushing my hips against him harder, squeezing his co ck as 1 rode him. He groaned. I knew he was trying to hold on until I was done. I loved teasing him and testing his endurance. I felt myself building once again and wanted him to feel what I felt. I kept squeezing, grinding my hips into him. He grabbed a fistful of hair, crashing his lips to mine. I didn't stop. I could feel him building, just as I was. We both crashed over the edge together, riding out the euphoria together.

His arms stayed tight around me as we both tried to catch our breath. I pressed my forehead to his, lightly running my hands through the back of his hair.

"At least I know what you'll be thinking about tomorrow," I laughed, still breathless.

"Definitely. This one is going to stick around for a long time," he said. His blue eyes smiling. I closed my eyes, still feeling nothing but pleasure. I felt his lips gently kissing my neck. I moaned quietly.

"I feel like I can't get enough of you sometimes," I said, slowly moving off his lap..

"Only sometimes? I feel like I can't get enough of you all the time. He smiled as he stretched out, opening his arms for me to lay on his chest.

"Okay, maybe all the time," I chuckled as I laid my head on his chest, draping my leg over his. His hand running lightly through my hair. I snuggled closer to him. "I missed you being able to hold me tightly."

"Me too, solnishko." He pulled me closer to him. "How does you hip feel tonight? Did we just make it worse again?"

"No, it's okay. It was just sore earlier. I think I might've walked too much today, which is du mb. I need to do it more."

"Not so much that you make yourself worse. I didn't have to hold back as much tonight, but it still wasn't what I've been thinking about for weeks now," he said, smacking my a ss.

"Noted." I laughed as he kissed the top of my head

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 107

Chapter One Hundred Seven

Sephie

The next afternoon, we went back to the penthouse, as Viktor and (van would be back with Armando. He knew about the penthouse, everyone did, but since no one knew about the house, they couldn’t bring him there. I didn’t mind. It meant more Vinny’s for my previously neglected stomach.

In the elevator, Misha looked to Andrei, his wide smile across his face. “So, are you going to tell Ivan about what happened, or do I get to? Please say me. I want to be the one to tell him.”

Andrei just laughed, nodding his head. Misha pumped his fist in the air. “Yes!”

“I had no idea Ivan didn’t like Tori that much. He hid it well, at least from me.” I thought for a moment. “That’s talent,” I said, smiling.

We dropped the guys off on their floor. As soon as the doors to the elevator closed, Adrik grabbed me by my waist, pressing me against the wall of the elevator. He pressed his body to mine. He grabbed my hands, pinning them above my head. He held them there with one of his hands. His other hand roaming down my body as his lips crashed into mine. As his hand ran down my hip to my thigh, I raised my leg and wrapped it around him, pulling him even closer to me with my leg.

He broke the kiss, breathless, as the doors dinged announcing our arrival. “Fu ck, Sephie,” he said planting one more kiss on my lips quickly before the doors started to open. He let my arms down, but kept my hands in his, turning to walk out of the elevator. He walked quickly past the two guards, not even looking at them. He opened the door, pulling me inside, and closing the door behind me quickly.

His lips were on mine once again as his hands pulled at my jeans as he walked backward through the penthouse. He bumped up against the kitchen counter. I felt his hands on my hips as he lifted me onto the counter. He stopped the kiss long enough to glance at his watch. “They’ll be here soon. We must hurry,” he said with his sexy smirk. He didn’t give me a chance to respond. before his lips were on mine again. He unbuttoned my jeans, sliding them part of the way down. He took a step back, pulling them all the way off. “We should talk about you wearing skirts occasionally,” he said as he stepped closer to me again. His hands were on my a ss, pulling me to the edge of the counter.

I smiled at him, loving his more aggressive side coming out. It was a new level of hot for me. I grabbed his shirt, pulling him toward me roughly. My lips were on his, desperate for him. My hands found his belt, unbuckling it, then unbuttoning his pants. I slid my hands inside his underwear, sliding them and his pants down as far as I could. I wrapped my hands around his co ck. I felt his breath hitch against my mo uth. I held him tightly in my hands, slowly moving up and down his shaft, before positioning him so he could slide inside me. I was not prepared to have him slim into me. I let out a load moan, grabbing onto his shoulders.

“OK?” he asked, breathless against my neck.

“Mmm. Very.”

“Good.” He slammed into me again, this time pulling my hips toward him as he did it, causing him to hit even deeper inside me. I couldn’t control myself and moaned loudly again. He increased his rhythm, not taking it easy on me at all. I loved every second of it. I wrapped my legs around his waist, tightening my grip on him as he kept slamming into me. I wanted him to keep going, surprised at my own Just for him in that moment.

I hugged him tighter. “Don’t hold back anymore. I can take it,” I said. He didn’t hesitate, he just pushed me back so I was laying on the counter, my legs still wrapped around his waist. If I thought he was intense before, he increased his thrusts into me, slamming into me with such intensity that I cried out in pleasure each time. He continued slamming into me until I thought I couldn’t take anymore, and ! finally felt him release. He leaned over me, lifting my shirt to kiss my stomach. I was a sweaty mess, but I didn’t care.

“You’ve been holding back even before I got hurt.” I said sitting up to look at him.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he shrugged.

“You won’t hurt me. You might make it difficult to walk later, but you won’t hurt me.”

He smiled as he leaned over to kiss me. “Come, we only have a few minutes before they get here. Just enough time for another round in the shower.” He pulled me to him, picking me up off the counter and walking quickly to the bedroom.

When we walked out the door of the penthouse to the elevator, both guards looked like they were holding back laughs. It suddenly hit me that they probably heard me earlier. This time, Adrik looked at both of them, getting enthusiastic nods from both. Not awkward in the slightest.

Once the elevator doors closed, Adrik laughed at my red cheeks. “I’m never going to be able to look them in the eye again,” I said, hiding my face in my hands. He just pulled me to him, wrapping his arms around me.

Viktor, Ivan, Armando, and Giana walked into Adrik’s office soon after we did. I was sitting on Adrik’s desk while he was seated at his desk, a permanent grin on my face after the proper fu cking Id just had.

As soon as I saw Viktor and Ivan walked in, I jumped off the desk and ran to them. “Viktor! My favorite track and field star!” I jumped into his arms as I heard Adrik and Ivan both laugh. He picked me up in a giant bear hug. When he set me down, I ran to Ivan. “Squishy! I missed you!” I jumped into his arms as well. He picked me up, spinning me around once, before walking further into the office before he set me down. He was smiling when he finally put me down.

“Your hip must feel much better, princess.” Ivan said as he bent down and kissed my cheek.

“You’re a genius, Ivan. Like seriously. It’s so much better now.”

Still smiling, he said, “that makes me very happy to hear, princess.”

“Me too,” Viktor said, bumping me gently with his shoulder as he walked past and sat down. Adrik stood and walked to Armando. I followed behind him, happy to see Armando again.

“Armando. Thank you for coming so quickly,” Adrik said, extending his hand.

“Of course, Boss. I had no idea the situation was so dire. Your men were filling me in on the plane.” He shook Adrik’s hand. He glanced to me, a small smile on his lips. “Miss Sephie, you look absolutely radiant, my dear.” He opened his arms for a hug. 1 happily obliged, catching Giana’s look of surprise. Oh boy. Here we go again

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Chapter One Hundred Eight

Sephie

“Thank you for coming. Armando. You’re my favorite. Don’t tell the others.” I said, winking at him. Both Viktor and Ivan said. “hey!” behind us.

Adrik’s arm pulled me to him. I tucked myself into his side, where I fit perfectly. He motioned for both of them to sit as he pulled me back toward his desk. I jumped on the cabinet behind his desk while he sat in his chair. I caught Ivan’s eye and gave him a devilish grin. I knew Misha was going to be so excited he was back. He knew there was something more to my grin. He raised an eyebrow, squinting his eyes at me.

Armando laughed, saying, “I hear Sephie did a good job of putting Dario and Massimo in their place.” Adrik chuckled, nodding his head. I glared at Viktor and Ivan, not knowing which one of them told him. It made Armando laugh more. “They deserved it, Sephie. They’ve always been a little too misogynistic for their own good.” I crossed my arms across my chest.

“That’s much nicer than how I would’ve phrased it.”

“Were you able to find anything out about your office building?” Adrik asked.

Armando exhaled loudly, running his hands through his dark hair. Not much. We have security footage from the days before. the explosion. My people didn’t find anything from the day before the explosion, but they’re continuing to look. It’s possible they avoided the cameras somehow.”

Ivan said, “given the new information about Dario and Massimo, I would say this was more a direct attack on Armando than on you, Boss. If he’s the only one that’s loyal to you, it would benefit them to get rid of him.”

Adrik nodded, then looked to Armando. “Would you like to stay here where we can keep a closer eye on you? We can have apartments arranged for both of you.”

“I was hoping to go to my house, but my security is not up to your standards.” Armando said. He thought for a moment. “If it really is just us against the rest of them, is it a good idea to both be in the same place?”

Viktor, trying not to be offended, said, “no one is getting in or out of this building without us knowing. We have round the clock security and can increase that at a moment’s notice.”

I caught Viktor’s eye and winked at him. He was cute when he was all Russian security master.

Adrik said, “I think you would both be safer here, but it’s your choice, Mando.”

Armando looked at Giana, who hadn’t said a word and frankly, looked terrified. I could see his face soften when he looked at her. She looked up at him, her cheeks flushing slightly as he looked at her thoughtfully. “We’ll stay here. Thank you, Boss. I need to keep her safe.” Her eyes went wide for a split second before she dropped her gaze. Her cheeks turning another shade of red darker.

I smiled at the exchange. Armando was a good man.

Adrik made a quick call to have two apartments readied for them. Giana timidly touched Armando’s arm and whispered something in his ear. He looked to Viktor and Ivan, “restroom?” I hopped off the cabinet, walking to the office door. “I can show her,” I offered. Arinando indicated for Giana to follow me. I walked out of the office, leaving the door open. I knew either Viktor or Ivan would get up to keep an eye out until we returned. Might as well make it easy for them.

I stole a glance at Glana as we were walking. Poor thing still looked terrified. “How long have you been working for Armando?” I asked, trying to help her feel more comfortable.

“Not even a year yet,” she said quietly, “I thought it was going to be a regular assistant job.”

I tried not to laugh. “Remind me to tell you how Ghost and I met,” said, smiling at her. “There isn’t much that’s regular around here, but you get used to it. Armando Is a good man. He’ll take care of you.” I pointed to the bathroom. “I’ll wait here.”

“Thank you,” she said, looking somewhat relieved.

After she walked into the bathroom, I turned to look back at the office door. Yep, there’s Ivan. I smiled big at him, motioning for him to come to me quickly. He walked to me without hesitation, somewhat confused. “You have to find Misha as soon as you can. He has an epic story for you. I’m dying for you to hear it. Now, quickly, go away. Poor girl is already scared to death.” I said pushing him back toward the office. He laughed, shaking his head at my nonsense.

Giana came out of the bathroom, looking slightly more relaxed. “How long have you, uh, been with… um…”

“Ghost?” I asked, smiling. “Unusual, I know. You’ll get used to it,” said, smiling at her. “Um, it’s been a few months now. Like 4-5? I actually don’t know the real answer to that question. I’m a terrible girlfriend.”

“He doesn’t think so. You can tell you love each other. I expected you to have been together for much longer. And his bodyguards? They’re scary when you’re not around. I like them much better when you’re in the same room.”

I laughed. “They’re not as scary as they come across. But it is their job to be intimidating and they’re very good at their job, if we’re being honest here.”

“Very good,” she said, wide-eyed just before we met Ivan at the door of the office. He stepped to the side to let us walk in ahead of him. I let Giana walk in first as I grabbed Ivan’s arm and wrapped it around my shoulders. I slid my arm around his waist as we walked into the office. Adrik smirked at me when we walked into the office.

Giana sat beside Armando, smiling shyly at me with Ivan as we walked past her. I felt bad for her. I knew Ivan enjoyed intimidating people, but I also recognized there was a deeper purpose for his gruff exterior. He was a complicated man, but I adored him despite his prickly exterior. I trusted his demons to expose Giana’s bad side, if there was one. I wasn’t going to stand in the way of that. If Armando was interested in her the way I thought he was, he deserved to have someone love him for him, not for his money and power.

It wasn’t long and someone knocked on the office door, dropping off two keys for Armando and Giana, telling them where their apartments were located. They were on the 5th floor, not far from Ms. Jackson and Mr. Turner. I hadn’t seen them since we got back.

“I can show them where their apartments are. I haven’t seen Ms. Jackson or Mr. Turner since we got back anyway. I want to stop by and say hi,” I said.

Adrik looked to me, smiling. He nodded his head, then looked to Viktor and Ivan. “One of you go with her.” He stood and pulled me to him, kissing my lips gently. “I’ll be here when you’re done.” He kissed my cheek, then whispered, “don’t be too long.”

I felt my cheeks flush. I smiled at him, noticing the spark in his ey

I looked to Viktor and Ivan. “Who’s coming with me?” I said dramatically.

They looked at each other, shrugged their shoulders and both walked toward me. “We haven’t seen Ms. Jackson or Mr. Turner either,” Viktor said.

“Aww, Viktor. You’re all soft and nougaty too. I love it.”

We stepped off the elevator, turning in the opposite direction from Ms. Jackson and Mr. Turner’s apartments. Armando was talking, as usual. Giana was quietly listening to him. I think she was the only one who was listening to him. It made me smile.

“Here you are. Do you guys need anything? Are you hungry? We can have someone grab you some food,” I asked.

Armando looked to Giana, who nodded her head. I smiled at her. “What are your feelings on sandwiches that will change your life?” Viktor and Ivan chuckled behind me.

Armando looked at me, his eyebrows raised. I looked surprised. “Tell me you know about Vinny’s, Mando?” He shook his head no. I turned to Viktor and Ivan. “You guys don’t share the gift that is Vinny’s?” my hands on my hips, trying to fake outrage.

“Well, uh, no. No, we don’t,” Viktor said.

“That’s fair. That’s totally fair. I’ll allow it.”

I turned back to Armando and Giana. “Given this is a special circumstance, you’re about to be allowed access into the inner sanctum of gastro-intestinal heaven. Prepare yourselves. This will, in fact, change your lives.”

Ivan laughed. “You should head up Vinny’s next marketing campaign.”

Chapter One Hundred Nine

Sephie

We left Armando and Glana to relax. Viktor made arrangements for someone to pick up sandwiches for them. They could eat and relax the rest of the evening. We walked to the other side of the floor to Mr. Turner's apartment. I knocked on his door and waited. No answer. I knocked one more time. I looked at Viktor, "What time is it?"

"5:50," he said.

"He should be home by now," I said, somewhat perplexed.

I walked across the hall to Ms. Jackson's apartment and knocked bij her door. We heard movement inside, then she opened the door.

"Oh, my! Either I just died and you boys are here to escort me to the other side or you're really standing there!" she exclaimed, clutching her chest.

I laughed. "It's really us, Ms. Jackson. We're real." I walked to her, hugging her. I missed this woman.

"Get in here. You're a sight for sore eyes. And I'm happy to see you too, child." She laughed as she ushered us all in her apartment. When we walked in, Mr. Turner was sitting at her table.

"Miss Sephie! It's better than wonderful to see you again!" He stood up to give me a hug. I always felt like he was the grandfather I never knew. I hugged him tightly. He offered his hand to Viktor and Ivan. "It's good to see you both as well. I knew there had to be something to the reports that your boss had died. I just couldn't believe it."

Ivan nodded, cutting his eyes to me. "It did not go completely to plan, but ultimately it worked out." He slid his arm around my shoulders as he was talking. I leaned my head against his shoulder.

"Don't make me have to kick your a ss in front of them," I said under my breath. He coughed but held it together.

Ms. Jackson asked, "where have you guys been? You had to go somewhere to lay low for a while, I'm sure. Did you need people to believe he was dead?"

Viktor nodded, surprised at her response. They still didn't know about her past. I would let her tell them about that, when and if she was ready. Even without her past as a spy, she was still a very astute woman. There wasn't much that got past her.

"But everyone is fine and alive? We haven't lost any eye candy, have we? I have big plans for Bingo, you know."

We all laughed. Ivan looked very seriously at her. "Name the time and place, Ms. Jackson. We will gladly accompany you." Viktor nodded in agreement.

She blushed, laughing. "Lord, I don't think you're ready for the number of heart attacks you'll be responsible for."

We spent a few more minutes visiting with them both before taking our leave. I knew Viktor and Ivan had to be exhausted. I also knew Adrik would be glad for the interruption when I went back to his office. Almost as glad as I would be to deliver that interruption.

We stepped onto the elevator and were immediately hit with the strongest perfume smell. I coughed as the doors closed, barely able to breathe. As I pulled my shirt over my nose, I had a flash of the sidewalk by the hotel where Mt. Turner worked. I could see Misha one step in front of me, looking back to me just as we were both hit. Why am I thinking about that day? I shook my head, trying to let go of those thoughts

My brain shifted to the night of the ball, in the bathroom, when I verheard the two women talking about Adrik. Something felt familiar. I looked at Viktor and Ivan, who were looking at each other, knowingly.

The elevator doors couldn't open fast enough for them. Ivan took my hand in his as he led me toward Adrik's office quickly. The smell of perfume was getting stronger, the closer to the office we got.

When we walked through the door to his office, I was not emotionally prepared to find another woman sitting on the edge of his desk. He had pushed his chair to the complete opposite end of his desk, like he was trying to get away from her. He looked angry but was trying to control it. Ivan glanced at me, a look of concern on his face. I felt his grip on my hand tighten slightly. I smirked at him, knowing he was worried I was about to lose my shi t on this woman.

As soon as Adrik saw us, he stood, walking around the opposite side of his desk to stay as far from her as he could. He held his arm out for me, a look of relief on his face. I went to him, tucking myself into his side. He looked worried, like Ivan did. He held me against him tightly.

"Who's this?" I tried to be as calm as possible, but I know they all heard the slight edge of anger to my voice.

She had turned to face us when we walked in the office. She was barely wearing any clothes. Her skirt was so short and so tight. that it barely covered her. She had what basically amounted to a bra on that only covered her breasts. Her stomach and shoulders were completely bare. Doesn't she ever get cold? She looked like she shopped at the same store that Armando's ex-girlfriend shopped at. She had long black hair that fell almost to her barely covered a ss. Her olive skin was on full display. She was short, thin. She likely watched what she ate, to keep her thin frame, but she'd definitely never picked up a weight. There wasn't a muscle on her.

Ivan took one step toward her, causing a look of fear to come across her face. "Vanessa," he said. I could hear the hatred. dripping from his voice as he said her name. It didn't help that he looked like a giant compared to her diminutive frame. "You're not leaving until you give us that key fob back."

She looked angry, but tried to mask it. "I don't have a key fob. The elevator was open."

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 110

Chapter One Hundred Ten

Sephie

“If you’re going to lie, you need to at least be smart about it. I’ve lived here for months and that elevator has never once been open. Don’t be stu pid,” I said, with as much pleasantness as I could muster. Which, admittedly, was not much.

The guys were caught off guard and all of them laughed. She looked completely surprised, but I couldn’t tell if it was from what I said, or the fact that Ivan was laughing. It could go either way, really. Obviously, this was a former girlfriend, if she had a key fob. I didn’t even have a key fob for the elevator. Granted, I never needed one as one of the guys was always with me. But still.

My head was starting to ache from smelling the entire bottle of perfume in one application. How does she smell anything other than that?

She looked at me, clear hatred on her face. “You might be living here now, but you won’t be for long. He’ll get rid of you just like he did all the rest. He probably can’t even remember your name.”

“See, that’s where you’re wrong. He knows my name. He screams it often,” I stepped in front of Adrik, crossing my arms over my chest. I raised one eyebrow, daring her to continue this fun little conversation. She looked flustered and looked toward the floor. I glanced at Ivan, who winked at me, a look of pride on his face. I felt Adrik’s hands on my hips, pulling me back against him.

“You think I’m in the same category as you. That was your first of many mistakes, Vanessa. You probably came here with the intent of either trying to get him back or at the very least to stir some shi t up and make us fight. But what you don’t know is that I know him better than you could ever dream of knowing him. It was plain as day that he wanted nothing to do with you.

I’d be willing to bet you tried to hug him or touch him and he moved away from you before you could, right?” Her eyes went wide. I didn’t give her time to respond. “You see, Vanessa, you probably think that your body is what will snag a man, which is why you put it on full display for the world to see. You think that’s all that men are interested in and will get you everything you want out of life. You might get attention from boys, but you will never keep a man’s attention. Try covering up a little bit. Maybe use only half the bottle of perfume instead of the whole bottle. Try working on yourself so that you have something to offer other than your heavily made-up face, a ss, and ti ts. Oh, and maybe stop trying to steal taken men.” I took one step toward her, to really drive my point home. “You’re going to leave here of your own accord this time, only because these three would pull me off you. But if I ever see your face this close to me again, I’ll make sure your a ss and ti ts will be the only thing you have to offer going forward. Now, and I mean this in the nicest way possible, so please listen to my words, hand over the key fob and get the fuc k out of here.” I walked toward her with my hand out, waiting for her to place the key fob in my hand. She looked at me like she wanted to say something. I raised my eyebrow and stared at her, daring her to speak. She looked past me toward Adrik.

“You’re going to let her speak to me like that?” she asked. Still trying to stir some shi t, I see. My patience was wearing thin. My head was starting to pound..

I heard him chuckle. “You say that like I would want to stop her.”

She scoffed at him, mumbling something under her breath. My patience had officially run out. “You’re testing my level of give a fuc k, Vanessa. Key fob. NOW.” I let my anger slip out. Viktor and Ivan took a step back, causing Vanessa’s eyes to go wide. She reached into her purse, pulling out the key fob. She timidly handed it to me.

“Oh look. It does exist,” I said, rolling my eyes. “Remember, lies need to be believable, sweetheart. Now, and I cannot stress this enough, get the FUC K out of my sight.” I turned to look at Ivan, who was trying hard not to laugh. He moved to escort her out of the building. I handed the key fob to Viktor, who also looked highly amused.

Adrik opened his arms for me. I walked back to him, as he wrapped his arms around me. I rested my head on his chest. Once Ivan and Viktor had walked her out of his office, I looked up at him. “My God, how long did it take your sense of smell to come back after breaking up with her? Like seriously. How could you smell anything after five minutes in the same room as her?”

He laughed. “It has gotten much worse since I dated her. That was one reason I never let her live here, though.”

I cocked my head to the side. “She didn’t live here? Why did she have a key fob then?”

He smiled at me. “None of my girlfriends ever lived here. That’s why she had a key fob, so she could come here without someone having to fetch her. My guys never stayed with any of my girlfriends, either. Frankly, it never crossed my mind. You’re the only one that they watch over. And the only one to live here. And the house too. No one else knows that place exists.” He gently ran his fingers through my hair, pushing a few curls back from my face. I closed my eyes, enjoying his touch, as well as trying to get some relief from my pounding head.

I sighed. “I love you, Adrik.” I felt his lips gently on mine.

“And I love you, Persephone.”

Viktor and Ivan walked back in soon after, both looking more amised than I’d ever seen them.

“Sephie,” Viktor started, but paused. “You’re just… fuc king awesome.”

Ivan said, “you should’ve seen the tantrum she threw on her way out of the building. She was pi ssed. I have to say I’ve been wanting to be able to throw her out of the building for a long time now. Thank you for that.” He looked at Adrik, smirking.

“Let me guess, you hated her from pretty much the beginning?” I asked, smiling at Ivan.

He nodded. “She showed up a few times when Boss was busy and couldn’t see her. She would throw major tantrums, like that was going to make him want to see her. She never did it in front of him though, but she would scream and yell at me. It never once worked, but she kept trying.”

I looked at Adrik. “I’m beginning to question your choices in women.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “I didn’t even date her for that long. I think she was only a couple of months. She was very… boring.”

I held my hand up. “Don’t expand on that. I don’t need to know. Now, can we get out of here? My head is seriously pounding. from having to smell the entire bottle of perfume at once.” Adrik held me closer, his hands in my hair to try and give me some relief.

“Of course, solnishko. I’ll have someone fumigate the office too.”

“And the elevator. We smelled her when we left the 5th floor,” I said. I leaned into him, sniffing his clothes. “And we should. burn these clothes. It’s on everything. Burn the key fob too, I don’t even care.”

“You don’t want your own key fob, princess?” Ivan asked.

“Why would I need one? I have six of them already,” I said, winking at him

Chapter One Hundred Eleven

Sephie

The four of us got in the elevator, me trying to breathe as little as possible. I looked at Ivan, grinning at him. “You guys should shower and change and then grab the other three and come upstairs. We’ll order food. Being bitchy makes me hungry.”

“You’re sure? I thought your head was hurting?” Viktor asked.

“I mean, it is. But I want to see the look on Ivan’s face when Misha tells him about what happened while you guys were away. I think not smelling this God-awful perfume anymore will help my headache go away. Seriously. I should’ve punched her just to see if I could restart her olfactory senses.”

I heard Viktor’s deep laugh as I pinched the bridge of my nose, closing my eyes. The doors dinged for their floor. Ivan said, “give us 20 minutes, princess.”

As the doors closed, Adrik wrapped his arms around me. “How bad is your headache, solnishko?”

“Not excruciating, but it’s not getting better either. I can’t get away from this smell though. I feel like I can taste it.”

He chuckled, kissing my temple. “We have just enough time to shower,” he whispered in my ear. I opened my eyes, looking up at him, knowing full well what he meant.

“You like it when I get all bitchy,” I said laughing.

“Surprisingly hot,” was all he said as the doors opened for the penthouse. He grabbed my hand, pulling me quickly toward the door.

The guys were already on the couches when we came out of the bedroom. At least Adrik had closed the bedroom door before ripping my clothes off.

“How’s your headache, princess?” Ivan asked.

“So much better now that I can smell again,” I said grinning at him.

“You’re getting headaches again, spider monkey?” Andrei asked, a look of genuine concern on his face.

Ivan looked to Andrei. “Vanessa.”

“WHAT?” Andrei and Misha both said at once.

Viktor said, “do you remember how she said she ‘lost’ the key fob for the elevator? Well, apparently she found it and used it this evening. She was in Boss’s office when we got back from the 5th floor.”

“And… how did that go?” Misha asked, his wide smile across his face.

Ivan laughed. “We knew it was Vanessa as soon as we got on the elevator. She always wore the same perfume. I was more worried about Sephie seeing her and jumping to a wrong conclusion.” He looked to me, somewhat apologetically. “I don’t know why I worried about that. I should’ve known you’d see through whatever she was pulling right away.”

I winked at him, shaking my head. He continued, “when we got to the office, Vanessa was sitting on the edge of his desk. He was all the way at the other end of the desk, like he was trying to get away from her. He stood up and walked all the way around the other side so he wouldn’t be anywhere near her to get to Sephic.”

Adrik added, “I was a little worried about how Sephie would read this situation too. I wanted to hold onto her, you know, just in case.” He laughed, looking at my shocked expression.

Viktor picked up the story. “We were all worried but had no reason to be. Of course, Sephie saw through the bu llsh it right away. Ivan told her to return the key fob. She lied and said the elevator was open. Sephie told her if she was going to lie that it needed to at least be believable. She said she’s been living here for months and the elevator has never once been open. You should’ve seen the look on Vanessa’s face when Sephie said she’s been living here. She made a snarky comment about Boss not. even knowing her name.” He started laughing and couldn’t finish. Both Ivan and Adrik had started laughing too and couldn’t speak.

Misha, Andrei, and Stephen looked to me to finish the story.

I shrugged my shoulders. “I just told her she was wrong and that he knows my name. He screams it often.” I could feel my cheeks flush slightly.

“OH SH IT!” Misha said, all of them now laughing too.

In between laughs, Ivan managed to say, “but that’s not all. She kept going. She called out Vanessa and what she was trying to do, then told her that all she had to offer to a man was her body. She told her that because the three of us were there that she wouldn’t rearrange Vanessa’s face, but if she ever sees her again, she will. She told her to give the key fob back and then to fu ck off.”

“I meant it in the nicest way possible,” I said, laughing.

Adrik said, “but it still gets better. Vanessa asked me if I was going to let Sephie speak to her that way. I saw the exact moment that Sephie’s patience ran out. She turned back to Vanessa, telling her as much and letting her anger slip out. The three of us all know that tone of voice. We all took a step back at the same time. Vanessa went wh ite, but she da mn sure produced the key fob and handed it to Sephie.”

“And then Sephie reminded her that lies needed to be believable and told her to get the fu ck out of her sight,” Ivan finished, still laughing.

Misha, Andrei, and Stephen were stunned for a moment, but they all three stood at once, clapping. I bowed as dramatically as I could.

“Who wants pizza? Being bitchy works up an appetite.” I patted my stomach, laughing. They all agreed and a call was made..

“Now, while we wait, it’s Misha’s turn for story time.”

Misha’s wide smile crept over his face. Poor Andrei’s cheeks went red, having to relive it all again. I walked behind Andrei and climbed over the couch to sit behind him while Misha told the story. I was wedged in between his sizeable frame and the back. of the couch, my legs and arms around him. “I’ll be your emotional support spider monkey for this, Bubba.”

He patted my legs. “You’re my favorite, spider monkey.

Chapter One Hundred Twelve

Sephie

Misha looked to Ivan. “You’re going to be so happy when you hear this story, man. So, we went to the house the morning after you guys left. Sephie wanted to. We get there and poor Andrei is scared shitless because he hasn’t spoken to Tori since we got back. So, of course Sephie devises a plan to let him go in the house alone for a few moments with her before we all walk in.”

I hugged Andrei a little tighter. “Yeah, so about that, that was a di ck move. I’m sorry.”

He laughed. “It was a di ck move, but I forgive you.”

Misha continued, “turns out Tori wasn’t there when we got there. She’d gone to the store for more food. Sephie wanted to go for a walk, so Andrei and I went with her. I wanted to go for a walk. Andrei wanted to put off the inevitable.” Andrei nodded his head, completely unashamed of his actions. “We were gone for a few hours. We sat by the lake almost the whole time, which made Sephie’s hip sore. Andrei offered to carry her back to the house, but she refused because of Tori. I offered instead and she refused at first, but took me up on the offer before we got to the house. We walked into the kitchen and Tori had her back to us. We just stopped and waited for her to turn around and see us there. Not gonna lie, I was just as scared as Andrei at this point.”

Stephen interjected, “any of us would have been. She’s scary.”

“So turns around and Andrei speaks first. Tori is immediately bitchy and makes a comment about us still being alive.

Andrei tried to explain that having to go no-contact was as much for her safety as ours. Then she looks at Sephie and makes a comment about us remaining in contact with her. Andrei tried to smooth it over by telling her she was with us, but it wasn’t what she was thinking. That’s when it all went to he ll. She made a comment about us carrying around Sephie like a ‘go ddamn princess that can’t be bothered to walk or something to that effect,”

Ivan interrupted him, looking to me. “She really said that?” he asked, completely shocked.

I nodded my head. “I should also add that she was abusing this one head of broccoli during this entire exchange. Like she slammed it on the counter and then had this giant knife that she was just murdering the broccoli with while this was. happening.” I made a dramatic motion like I was stabbing something with one hand.

Ivan clicked his tongue. I could see the anger starting to come to the surface.

Misha picked the story up. “I saw red when she said that, so I set Sephie down and walked toward Tori. I told her she was never to speak about Sephie like that again, not only because she’s Boss’s girlfriend but because she’s our little sister and if she ever said something like that again I would drag her to the front gate s she could leave.” Andrei squeezed ne a little tighter when Misha referred to me as their little sister. I caught Adrik’s gaze from the couch opposite to us, his sexy smirk on his face. He winked at me, causing me to smile at him.

Viktor asked, “what did Tori say after that?”

“Nothing. We didn’t give her a chance to say anything. We left the kitchen and went upstairs to the office. I told Boss what she said right away, even though Sephie didn’t want me to,” Andrei said, looking sideways at me.

Ivan clicked his tongue again, looking at me. “Why would you not want him to tell Boss that?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “She was just mad. People sometimes say things when they’re mad. I figured she would calm down and feel differently.”

Ivan looked at Adrik, who nodded his head once. Ivan looked back at me. “What’s said in anger is the truth, princess.”

I know, I know. That’s exactly what Adrik said,” I said smiling at Adrik.

“So, what did you do?” Ivan asked Adrik.

“I made sure Andrei didn’t want to pursue anything further with her and then I fired her,” he said, smiling.

Ivan stood up, both hands in the air, “YES!”

I couldn’t help but laugh at his excitement. Even Andrei laughed.

“I’m going to enjoy going to the house so much more now,” Ivan said, smiling.

“I told you he was going to be excited about this,” Misha said to me.

“You were totally right. I had no idea that Ivan hated her that much. Why did you ha te her that much, anyway?” I asked Ivan.

He thought for a minute. “I don’t know exactly. There was just always something about her that irritated me. She acted like she was scared of us, but I never felt like she really was. There was something always underneath the surface with her that didn’t sit right with me. It changed once you got here, too. I don’t think anyone else caught it, but I caught her looking at Sephie a few times when she thought no one was looking. It was pure hatred, especially when Boss couldn’t keep his hands off her. I think that’s where her jealousy really came from. She really wanted Boss and was mad because he never looked twice at her.”

Who doesn’t want that sexy a ss man. I mean, look at him. LOOK AT HIM,” I said, pointing at Adrik. He just shook his head, laughing at my silliness.

Andrei said, “now that you mention it, she did talk about him a lot. She seemed astounded that we were all so different after Sephie came. Like she couldn’t understand it.”

“She asked me what my secret was like the day after I got you two to talk. Spoiler alert: I have no secret.”

Stephen got up to get a drink from the kitchen. “You’re unapologetically you, Sephie. It allows us the same freedom. She’s still trying to pretend she’s someone she’s clearly not, therefore she doesn’t know how to act and doesn’t understand why we act differently around you.”

I just looked at him, somewhat shocked. “You’re like Yoda, just taller. And less green. You’re so quiet all the time and then you just drop a giant truth bomb on everyone, then don’t speak again for 5-7 business days.”

“My ears are nowhere near that big,” he said, pretending to be offended.

“Valid point. Completely valid,” I said, smiling at him

Chapter One Hundred Thirteen

Adrik

We talked and laughed for hours that evening. I can't remember the last time I had this much fun. We told Sephie stories about our crazy adventures, which usually involved at least one of us almost dying. She was always so curious and enthusiastic to always know more. I found myself enjoying telling her stories and enjoying her reaction just as much. I knew the guys all felt. the same way. There weren't many people that we could talk to about the things we'd done in our past without fear of them leaving. She accepted us completely, past and all.

Every time I think I can't possibly love her more, she proves me wrong yet again.

Before they left for the night, Ivan asked about Sephie's hip. "Tine to change the bandage today or tomorrow?"

"I was going to do it tonight. It's been two days since the last one. She's been walking much better, until she overdid it with walking at the house and sitting by the lake too long. You can take a look at it, too. Make sure it looks right. You know more than I do about what it should look like."

He nodded his head. Sephie was laughing about something with Viktor. She glanced over to me like she could feel my gaze on her, smiling at me. I felt my heart jump in my chest when I saw her smile stretch across her face as she looked at me. Even still. I motioned for her to come to me. She hugged Viktor, kissing his cheek, then walked quickly to me.

"We should change your bandage while Ivan is still here so he can see it and make sure it really is getting better," I said, kissing her temple as she wrapped her arms around my waist.

"Glad you remembered, because I forgot that was a thing that was supposed to happen today." She smiled at both of us. "Where do you want to gaze upon my hip bone, gentlemen?"

She was so much happier since we had come home. She was starting to act like she felt better in Italy, but I could tell she was still in so much pain. She was healed enough now that she felt better. It was easier for her to be her normally happy self.

"Everything is in the bathroom," I said, shaking my head at her. I loved her silliness. I loved that she constantly made me laugh.

"To the loo!" She walked toward the bedroom, Ivan and I following her, both equally amused at her.

When I peeled the bandage off, she flinched. Her skin was still so sensitive to the adhesive, but that was really the only thing bothering her now. The wound looked even better than the last time we changed the bandage. Ivan really was a genius. He bent down to get a closer look at it.

"It's healing now. No more red around the edges and it's starting to get smaller. See?" he stood up, pointing to it for me to look. I took a closer look and noticed what he was referring to. She was still likely going to have a big scar there, but at least it was starting to heal. It looked like I wouldn't need to call a doctor, after all.

We re-packed it with more honey and put a fresh bandage on it. The other guys were waiting for us to come back out before they went downstairs. They all had looks of concern on their faces, waiting to hear the status of her wound.

Ivan put them at ease. "It's healing. It looks much better now."

They all visibly relaxed when they heard the news. They, like me, were still carrying some guilt over what had happened to her. Hearing that she was feeling better and finally starting to heal made it easier to cope with. They loved seeing her happy just as much as I did. I knew, without a doubt, that if anything were to happen to me, she would still be well taken care of. They would make sure of it. I found comfort in that thought, especially since it was starting to feel like the calm before the storm with everything going on.

They each took turns hugging her good night and headed downstairs. I knew Viktor and Ivan were likely exhausted, but they were having too much fun to want to leave.

Once we were alone, she caught me gazing thoughtfully at her, a small smile on my lips. "What are you thinking about, love?" she asked me as she cleaned up pizza boxes. There were no leftovers to worry about. The nice thing about having to feed so many men.

"How wonderful it is to be able to talk so openly about our past. There aren't many people that would be so comfortable with it. We told stories tonight that we've never told anyone," I said, pulling her to me.

"I'm glad you told me. I love hearing your stories. I love learning about your past. I find it fascinating." She looked up at me, a small smile on her lips. She looked at me with that spark in her eye that only I could see. I still found it so easy to get lost in her eyes. I pressed my lips to hers, wanting to make her mine. Officially. When this mess with the other bosses was over, I decided I was going to marry her.

I had never considered marriage before. It just wasn't something that was important to me. I never wanted children. With Sephie, I found myself indifferent to the idea. I wouldn't care if it happened, but I also wouldn't care if it didn't. I need to have that conversation with her at some point. But I wanted to make her mine. I knew she loved me. I knew she wasn't going anywhere. But I still wanted to marry her.

I looked at her, loving the look in her eyes when she looked at me. "I'm glad you're feeling so much better, too. You've been yourself again since we got home. The guys see it too. It makes them feel better too."

I keep threatening them with an a ss kicking if they don't let it go, but I know you all still feel guilt over it. I see the relief on your faces when I don't limp. It's unnecessary, but I understand it. I would still feel guilty if the roles were reversed."

I smiled sweetly at her. "How did I ever get so lucky to find you? You never cease to amaze me, solnishko." I chuckled. "Especially with the Vanessa situation. I was worried that was going to go very differently."

She laughed, pressing her hands to my chest. "If you wouldn't have made it so completely obvious you wanted nothing to do with her, I might've felt more jealous. But you're so obvious anytime another woman looks at you. From the beginning, even. When we went to the restaurant so I could see Max. You wouldn't even look at another woman that night. You've never changed. It's like they don't even exist in your world. While I love that about you, the evil side of me secretly also loves it because it makes the women so angry that you won't even look at them. I might love that part a little too much," she said, looking down. She chewed on her bottom lip.

I swiped my thumb over her bottom lip so she would stop chewing it. "You need to know what it's like to be chosen. Over and over again, solnishko. For me, you're the only choice. Forever and always. The only choice."

Her breath caught, her eyes showing the surprise at my words. I looked at her, knowing she would need to search my eyes. Constantly searching for what she would never find. It was amusing to me now, but I would allow her to do it as many times as she needed to convince herself that I was never going to not choose her. She eventually smiled, convinced once again. She stood on her toes and pressed her lips to mine, pulling me closer to her. God, I love this woman

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 114

Chapter One Hundred Fourteen

Adrik

I woke sometime during the night to an empty bed. I was admittedly exhausted by the time we finally went to sleep. I just couldn't get enough of her right now, especially now that I wasn't having to hold back as much. She was amazing. She would match my intensity every time, sometimes surprising me with her own intensity. She would regularly test the limits of my endurance and I fucking loved that about her.

I stretched, moving to get up and immediately regretted it. I was sore. I bet she's sore too. I should calm down for a bit or else she's going to end up hurt again. I found a pair of pants and slipped them on, getting up to go see where she was. It wasn't like her to get up in the middle of the night unless something was wrong. It worried me.

I found her standing at the windows, a mug in her hand. She heard me walk out and turned toward me. "I'm sorry, did I wake you? I was trying to be quiet." She was wearing my shirt from earlier that day and nothing else. There was nothing sexier than seeing her in one of my shirts.

I wrapped my arm around her waist from behind her. "Your absence woke me, solnishko," I said, kissing her shoulder. "Are you okay? Did your headache come back?"

She put one arm on top of mine that was around her waist, lacing her fingers through mine. "No, it didn't come back. I can't get my brain to sh ut off. I made myself some tea hoping it would help me relax and go back to sleep."

"What's going on in your brain? Did you have a nightmare again?" was concerned she had gotten stuck in the never-ending. loop of the ball again and I didn't hear her to pull her out of it. That thought was one that terrified me. It seemed like my voice was what could pull her out of that and I was terrified that she would be stuck in that loop and I wouldn't be there to pull her out of it, leaving her stuck replaying that scene endlessly.

"No. Well, yes. But not the loop at the ball. When we got on the elevator and I smelled Vanessa's perfume, my mind. immediately went to the day that Misha and I were attacked. I could see Misha a step ahead of me and I saw him turn back to look at me just as we were both hit. I closed my eyes and tried to not think about it at the time, but my mind jumped. immediately to the night of the ball."

I tightened my arm around her, cursing quietly under my breath.

"No, it's okay. I was thinking about when I went to the bathroom, Jvan waited outside for me. There were these two women in the bathroom and they were talking about you. I could hear their whole conversation. They were talking about how there were rumors that you were g ay because you hadn't been seen in public with a woman in years. But then one of them said she knew one of your ex-girlfriends. She said you were always an as shole and would call her the wrong name. That's when I knew for sure they were talking about you," she giggled. "She made a comment about how you never told anyone your real name. Then the other one mentioned the guys and said how much she'd like to take a ride on one of them. Ivan told me I had five minutes, but of course I told him I could be out in three, so I couldn't wait for them to leave. I walked out and told them I could introduce them to the guys, but that I knew for a fact they appreciated boldness so they should introduce themselves as I washed my hands."

I clicked my tongue. "You know they can't talk to people when they're working."

She giggled. "Why do you think I told them to introduce themselves?"

I kissed her neck. "You're a little bit evil, solnishko." I smiled against her neck, biting gently. I felt her sigh as she was lost in her thoughts. "Those two scenes are what you've been thinking about instead of sleeping?"

She nodded her head, sipping the tea. "I can't get rid of the feeling that something is familiar about those two scenes and can't figure out why smelling her perfume in the elevator made me think of that. I've never seen her before today. At least, not that I know of."

I thought for a moment. "We can ask Stephen about it tomorrow. He has experience with hypnosis and how certain things can trigger memories. He might be able to help you connect it."

"Why am I not surprised that he's the one that can mindfuck you?"

I laughed. "I know, right? You don't know if he's just really quiet or if he's thinking of 50 different ways to ki ll you."

She laughed, leaning her head back against my shoulder, giving me complete access to her neck. I kissed down her neck as she said, "I said almost the exact same thing to Misha and Andrei the other day."

We stood in silence for a few minutes while she kept sipping her tea. She finally yawned and I felt her body relax. "Better?" I asked.

She nodded. "I'm sleepy again. I made that tea like triple strong, so I apologize in advance if I sleep until noon now."

I took the mug from her, setting it down on the coffee table. I picked her up, her head resting against my shoulder. "You can sleep as long as you need to, my love. You're so much better now hut your body still needs time to heal. It doesn't help that I'm practically addicted to you now." I kissed her forehead as we walked back to bed.

She sighed, making the quiet cooing noise that she only made when she was super sleepy and happy. "I don't mind that part. I love that part, actually. You take all the pain away for a bit."

I laid her down on the bed. She moved over so I could climb in behind her. I wrapped my arms around her as she snuggled back into me. I loved that feeling of having her in my arms, wanting to be as close to me as possible. I held her tightly, knowing she was asleep again almost immediately. I smiled to myself, thinking about how much I loved her as I drifted off to sleep once again as well.

Chapter One Hundred Fifteen

Adrik

I woke up late the next morning. Sephie was still sound asleep on my chest. It never seemed to matter how we fell asleep each night, that's inevitably where she would end up. It seemed to be her favorite spot and I was not going to deny her. I ran my hands through her hair, expecting her to start to wake up. She didn't move. Guess triple strength tea really does do the trick.

I laid under her for a while longer, running my fingers through her hair and over her body, enjoying the peace. I didn't have anything scheduled until after lunch, so I could afford to spend extra time with her this morning. I felt her fingers start to play on my chest. I smiled, knowing she was having happy dreams, at least.

My mind wandered to our conversation earlier and her experience after smelling Vanessa's perfume. As far as I knew, she hadn't thought about the attack or the night of the ball for at least a week, if not longer. Once she was able to kick her uncle's voice out of her head and she broke the loop of the night of the ball, she hadn't given it much thought. It seemed strange that both incidents would come back over something completely unrelated.

Why had Vanessa come back? Sephie was completely right, Vanessa did try to touch me when she came into my office. I've never felt so repulsed in my life. The thought of any woman other than Sephie touching me makes my skin crawl. I couldn't get away fast enough from her. She sat on the edge of the desk and all I could think about was how she was in Sephie's spot. I couldn't stop thinking about Sephie sitting on my desk. I wasn't even listening to what Vanessa was saying. Her voice was always annoying to me on a good day. And my God, the smell. Her perfume was strong when worn correctly. It was unbearable when she wore it. I didn't even tell Sephie, but I threw out the clothes we were both wearing that night. Somehow, I don't think she'll mind.

I did eventually catch a few things that Vanessa was saying before Viktor and Ivan walked in with Sephie. She said she'd heard I was back and wanted to make sure I was okay. She said she cried for days when she heard I had been killed. Right. Where would she have heard I was back from? As far as I knew, she wasn't connected to anyone else in my organization. I always checked out a woman's background before I dated them. Except for Sephie. I didn't care when it came to her. My usual rules were thrown completely out the window when it came to her. I should have one of the guys put somebody on Vanessa for a few days. Something doesn't feel right about her just "randomly" showing back up, after dost two years.

I felt Sephie snuggle into me more, still sound asleep, making her tooing noises. I held her tighter against me, glad that she had broken me from my own thoughts. Regardless of whether she was aware of it or not.

I checked the time. I'd been laying there watching her and thinking about everything for over an hour. I needed to get up so I wouldn't be late to my meeting with Armando and a few other business owners in the city. We were all working toward the same goal, so I didn't feel like Sephie's presence was imperative. All the business owners that were coming were close associates of either Armando or myself. They knew we could help them make even more money. I wasn't worried about deception with them.

I gently picked Sephie up off my chest enough that I could slip out from under her. She stirred just slightly, making me hopeful she would wake. My hopes were dashed when she rolled over and curled up in a new position. I smiled at her, pulling the blanket over her so she wouldn't get cold without me. She always said I kept her warm at night. I carefully crawled back onto the bed and kissed her cheek before leaving to get dressed. I wasn't looking forward to being away from her, but I wanted her to sleep. Clearly, she needed it. I would have one of the guys come up and wait for her to wake up so she wouldn't be completely alone. She still wasn't awake when I was ready to leave. I left her a note, hoping that she would see it and put pants on before walking out of the bedroom. Not that I didn't trust my guys, but some things were reserved only for me and I liked it that way. I kissed her once more before quietly leaving for my meeting.

I met Viktor and Ivan in my office. "Where's the princess?" Ivan asked, a look of slight concern on his face.

She had trouble sleeping last night. I want her to talk to Stephen (oday. She said smelling Vanessa's perfume took her back to the day of the attack on her and Misha, as well as the night of the ball," I said. Both tensed, looking seriously worried now. "I know. I had the same reaction. She said it wasn't that loop she was stuck in on the plane. She said it triggered a memory of listening to two other women in the bathroom earlier in the evening."

Ivan chuckled. "Did she tell you what she did to those women?"

I laughed, nodding my head. Ivan just shook his head. Viktor looked lost, "what happened?"

Still smiling, I said, "she overheard these two women talking about me and the rumors about me. One of them apparently knows an ex of mine, so she confirmed the rumors were untrue, but did say I was an as shole that couldn't remember my girlfriend's names. That's how Sephie knew for sure they were talking about me." I paused to laugh. "The other lady apparently wanted to take a ride on one of you. They didn't know Sephie was in there, but because Ivan was waiting for her, she didn't. want to wait for them to leave, so she came out and offered to introduce them to you guys."

"But then she told them that she knew that we appreciated boldness so they should introduce themselves instead," Ivan finished, laughing.

Viktor, still somewhat confused, asked, "doesn't Sephie know we can't talk to people while we're working?"

"Oh, she knew. That's exactly why she told them to introduce themselves," I said.

Viktor cursed under his breath, laughing along with us. "She's a little bit evil," he said, laughing his deep belly laugh.

"That's why she couldn't sleep last night. She said she just kept going back to those two scenes, so she got up and made herself some tea. She said she made it triple strength, so it's not surprising that she's still sound asleep upstairs. One of you go upstairs and wait for her to wake up. Or send one of the other guys," I said "And I want someone on Vanessa for a few days. It doesn't make sense that she came back after all this time. That wasn't random. I need to know who told her to come back."

Viktor nodded, "already on it, sir. We had her followed when we tossed her from the building." He pulled his phone from his pocket to send a text, presumably to one of the other three to go wait for Sephie.

"Well done. Thank you."

"I told Misha and Andrei to battle it out and decide who would go upstairs. Stephen is in the lobby waiting for your associates for the meeting."

"Perfect. I know she's safe up there, but I haven't been away from her in a few weeks and quite frankly, I don't like it," I ran my hand through my hair. I knew they would understand my obsessive need to make sure she was always protected.

"Honestly, Boss, I'm surprised you were able to leave without her waking up. She's just as attached to you as you are to her," Ivan said. "If it were anyone else, it might make me want to pu ke, ut you two are fu cking adorable." He grinned when he said it.

I glared at him but laughed. "We are fu cking adorable."

We were still laughing when Stephen stuck his head in my office. "Everyone is here, Boss. They're all in the conference room. Where's Sephie? Is she okay?"

I nodded, still occasionally surprised at their concern for her. "She's fine. I want you to talk to her later, though. Vanessa's perfume triggered memories for her of the day she and Misha were attacked, as well as the ball. We can't figure out why."

He looked surprised. "She didn't have nightmares again, did she?

"No. Well, not the same one as she was in on the plane. Different memories. The fact that she's thinking about the day she and Misha were attacked is strange to me. She never seemed like that bothered her, at least mentally, like the ball did. And I have no idea why smelling perfume would trigger the memories."

Stephen exhaled. "Could be a number of things, honestly. We'll talk about it later and get to the bottom of it."

I put my hand on his shoulder as I walked out of the office, on my way to the meeting. My mind was on Sephie, not at all on This meeting I was walking into.

Chapter One Hundred Sixteen

Sephie

I woke up curled up under the covers. I didn't even need to check the bed to know that Adrik was gone. I only needed covers when he wasn't in bed with me. He was like having a personal heater next to me all night long, to covers were never needed. It's partially why I loved laying across his chest so much. It was the warmest option. Bonus points that he always ran his fingers through my hair when I was on his chest.

I stretched my legs out, feeling the soreness from our night before. The day before too. The two days before. I was beginning to lose count, honestly. We couldn't get enough of each other right now. I hoped it never ended, honestly. I loved every second of it, especially now that he didn't feel like he had to hold back as much. I was surprised at how much his need for me and his absolute lust for me turned me on.

I rolled over, noticing the closed bedroom door. He left me a note.

Sephic,

Triple strength tea works better than expected. I'm sending one of the guys to wait for you to wake up, so maybe put on pants before leaving the bedroom. I have a meeting this afternoon. You know where to find me. I miss you already.

Love you, A

I laughed, grateful that he told me to put on pants. Definitely would not have thought of that. I got up, found appropriate clothes. and went to the bathroom to splash some water on my face. It was just past noon. Triple strength tea really does work.

I walked in to find Andrei and Misha both sitting on the couches, discussing something that sounded very serious.

"Let me guess, you guys had a draw and couldn't decide on who would come up here, so you both came?"

They both laughed, nodding their heads. I looked at Misha, "we're going to need to work on your strategy, young grasshopper. You're too predictable, but at least you switched it up just enough that you forced a draw this time." I winked at him.

"How are you feeling, spider monkey? Did the nightmares come back last night?" Andrei asked.

"No. Well, not exactly. Not the same one as you're thinking of," I slid, sitting in between them on the couch. "When I first smelled Vanessa's perfume on the elevator, I had a flashback to the day that Misha and I were attacked." I looked to Misha. "I could clearly see you a step ahead of me and the moment when you looked back to stop me right before we were both hit from opposite directions."

He looked puzzled. "Why would you think about that moment aft smelling her perfume, gazelle?"

"I'm not sure. It's that same weird familiar feeling that I had about the guys that attacked us. Like there's some connection there that I'm not seeing. When I was on the elevator, I tried to no think about that day. So, instead, my brain jumped to the night of the ball."

Both guys cursed under their breath. I smiled at them. "No, not what you're thinking. Adrik had the same reaction. Ivan had escorted me to the bathroom earlier in the evening. He told me I had five minutes, or he was coming in atter me. Of course, me being me, I told him I could be out in three. When I was in one of the stalls, there were two women who came out and were at the sink. They were talking about Adrik and about the rumors he was g ay. One of them said she knew one of his exes, that he was an as shole, and that he never remembered her name. That's how I knew for sure they were talking about him. One of them, the one that knew his ex, made a comment about him never telling anyone his real name. The other one made a comment about you guys and how much she'd like to take a ride on any one of you. I was hoping they would leave before I came out, but of course, they lingered. I wasn't going to let Ivan win, so I came out. They immediately recognized me. I just smiled and told them that I could introduce them to you guys, but that I happened to know that you guys appreciated boldness so they should Introduce themselves. It was just under three minutes, in case you were wondering." I laughed.

Spider monkey, you know we can't talk to anyone when we're working, right?" Andrei asked.

"Of course I know. That's why I told them to introduce themselves."

They both started laughing. Misha gave me a high five. "You're a little bit evil, gazelle."

"I don't think any of you would've been interested, if i'm being honest. They both looked like the type to look like a completely different person without makeup. Somehow, I don't think that's the type of girl any of you go for. I could be wrong though. It's happened like once before."

They both turned up their noses, shaking their heads no.

I crossed my arms over my chest. "I rest my case," smiling at them both.

"Why would smelling Vanessa's perfume make you think of those two instances?" Misha asked, puzzled.

"I don't know. Adrik wants me to talk to Stephen later, because OF COURSE he's the one that would know how to mindfuck someone."

We all laughed. Poor Stephen really was just a nice guy, but he was so much quieter than the rest of them that it made him stand out.

"Are you hungry, spider monkey?" Andrei asked.

"Don't ask st upid questions, Bubba. Of course I'm hungry. And of course I want someone to bring me some Vinny's," I looked at him, a devilish grin on my face.

Misha pulled his phone out of his pocket. He gave orders, in Russian, then ended the call, putting his phone back in his pocket.

"They'll be here shortly." His wide smile stretching across his face. His black hair was getting longer on top, so it would fall over his eyes frequently, causing him to brush it back out of his eyes.

"You guys are so good to me." I got up to get some water from the kitchen. "Anybody else want some water?" Both hands shot up. I grabbed three water bottles from the fridge and returned to the couch. "Who knows what the meeting Adrik has today is about?"

"He's meeting with business associates of his, Armando, and a few business associates of Armando's as well. They're all people. he regularly does business with. They've been working on a project for a while now," Andrei said.

"Sounds exciting," I said, sarcastically. "That's probably why Adrik left a somewhat open invitation for me to interrupt the meeting."

Andrei chuckled. "You can interrupt any meeting he's in. He won't care if it's you."

I grinned at him. "Just because I can, doesn't mean I should."

Misha's phone rang once in his pocket. He looked at it. "Food is downstairs. I'll be right back," he said getting up to go fetch our lunch.

1

"Misha, I can't even begin to describe how much I love you in this moment," 1 called after him. I just heard him laugh as he opened the door.

"What am I? Chopped liver?" Andrei asked, faking outrage.

"Bubba, you know I love you. Besides, I still have to make it up to you over the whole Tori situation. That did not go as I had planned."

He shook his head no. "You didn't know she would ultimately turn out to be like that. You were just doing what you always do trying to make everyone else happy. There's nothing to make up for. You're still my favorite spider monkey."

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Chapter 117

Chapter One Hundred Seventeen

Sephie

We ate lunch and decided to pass the time in the gym. I still wasn't 100 percent but was getting stronger with each day. I'd worked out a few times since getting hurt, with Andrei's guidance, and didn't make anything worse. So far, so good. Besides, working out harder meant I could eat more. It was a win-win for me.

Andrei still wouldn't let me work out like normal and he insisted that I keep it short. Today was no different, but at least it was something. It also helped me pass the time until Adrik was out of his meeting.

After I was done in the gym, we went back to the penthouse so I could shower and change. It was middle of the afternoon by the time I was done with all that, so I decided to check on the status of the meeting, thinking it would be done. When we got to Adrik's office, Ivan was sitting in the office.

"Boss is still in the meeting, princess, but I'm sure he will be happy for you to interrupt," he said when we walked in. He had at knowing grin on his face, like he knew Adrik would be missing me as much as I was missing him.

"How are they still going? Hasn't it been a couple hours already? Is this meeting that serious?" I asked, surprised they weren't done yet.

Ivan shook his head. "It's not serious. Just complicated. Go interrupt. He'll be grateful you did. Trust me," he winked at me.

"Are you trying to get me in trouble, Grumplestiltskin?"

"Not at all. I promise you can punch me in the nose again if he's mad that you interrupted the meeting." He sounded sincere. I squinted my eyes at him, but decided to test it. I walked to the meeting room, cracking the door open quietly. I stuck my head. in, seeing Viktor standing by the door. He grinned at me and motioned me inside the room. As I stepped around the door, he cleared his throat. Adrik immediately looked to Viktor, his eyes finding mine. He smirked, motioning me to come to him. No one else in the meeting had noticed me step inside the room. I initially resisted, but he raised his eyebrow at me, looking at met sternly. I felt a gentle push from Viktor as I walked sheepishly toward him. As I got closer, I noticed an empty chair on the opposite side of him. He pulled it closer to him, making it obvious that it was there for me, in case I decided to disrupt the meeting. I sat down quickly, glancing at the other men in the meeting. Most of them were so engrossed in what was being said that they still hadn't noticed me. Adrik put his arm across my lap, his hand on my thigh. I held onto his arm, smiling at him shyly, happy to be able to see him and touch him again. This was the longest we'd been apart in a few weeks and as silly as it sounds, I missed him.

He squeezed my thigh, like he was reading my mind. Armando noticed me and nodded his head at me. I smiled at him, listening to what was being said and looking at the other men more closely. They all looked comfortable in the meeting and they were all very occupied with whomever was speaking. A few of them nodded along to things being said. A few would make a face at something that was said, but would add their two cents, and the conversation would continue. I looked at Adrik to find him. watching me, watching everyone else. He raised an eyebrow at me, silently asking if I caught anything out of the ordinary. I smiled at him and shook my head no. I heard him exhale quietly. I smiled to myself at how much he was starting to rely on my assessment of people. I squeezed his arm. He squeezed my thigh in response.

The meeting kept going, the subject changing several times. They were very thorough in their planning. The project was a similar one to Armando's project in Naples, but to a larger scale. The building would be a multi-purpose building, with restaurants, office space, as well as apartments. There were a few men who expressed concern over getting restaurants on board with leasing space in the building.

Before I realized I said it out loud, I said, "why would you be worried about that? They have a built-in customer base if they lease space in this building. They don't even need to do outside advertising. They can sustain their business strictly on the people in the building. That's a restaurant's wet dream." Everyone stopped and looked at me, most of them shocked to see me, as they still hadn't realized I was in the room. "Oh, shit. I said that out loud, didn't I?" I put my hand over my mouth, my eyes wide. I looked to Adrik, who was simply smiling at me. He squeezed my thigh, his thumb rubbing circles.

She makes a great point, gentleman. If we present it like that, I don't see how any restaurant would be wary of leasing space in this building," he said.

Armando winked at me. "I agree. I think we should present it as a restaurant's wet dream, even," he said laughing.

The whole room started laughing, helping me to feel somewhat relieved I opened my big mouth. I chewed on my bottom lip, still embarrassed. I looked to Adrik again, his eyes darkened as he looked at my bottom lip, his grip on my thigh tightening.

Soon after, the rest of the room collectively decided that they had gotten through all the points they wanted to. Everyone stood to indicate the end of the meeting. They were talking amongst themselves, shaking hands, getting updates on various other projects, and continuing smaller points about the meeting that just concluded. Adrik stood and pulled me up. My hip was sore from sitting for so long, but I was able to stand without flinching.

Armando walked to me, opening his arms for a hug. "Sephie, I'm so glad you joined us." I hugged him as he asked quietly. "anything off?" I stepped back, smiling at him. I shook my head no.

"All good, Mando. How's Giana? Is she still mostly terrified?"

He chuckled. "Mostly, yes, but she's getting better. It's been a crazy few days for her, admittedly." He had a faraway look in his eye as he thought about her. A small smile crept across his lips as he was lost in thought.

"She seems like a sweet girl." I said.

He nodded, still clearly thinking of something else. Or someone else. A few of the other men walked up to Adrik, then spoke to me, still laughing at my comment. "You should consider a job in marketing" a few of them said, still amused.

They started filing out of the meeting room. The guys were escorting them down to the lobby as they left the meeting. I felt Adrik's arm around me, his lips on my temple. "I'm very happy you decided to join me."

I turned to look at him. "I almost didn't, but Ivan said I could punch him in the nose again if you were mad that I interrupted the meeting. I decided to test that."

I grinned at him as he laughed at me.

"I'm sorry you won't get to punch him in the nose, but I'm still happy you joined me. I missed you," he said quietly.

I looked around the room to see who was left and if any of them were paying to attention to us. There were only a few men left in the room, along with Armando, and nobody was looking at us. I kissed Adrik quickly. "I missed you too. That's really why I interrupted. I mean, punching Ivan would've just been an empty perk for not being able to see you."

He pulled me closer to him, kissing me again, this time more passionately. "You should come to all my meetings, solnishko. You offer valuable insight," he said.

I laughed. "I don't know why you put up with me and my inability to control my mouth."

Chapter One Hundred Eighteen

Adrik

I was lost in my own thoughts about whether Sephie was awake yet when I heard Viktor clear his throat. I looked toward him, immediately catching her eye. My breath caught when I saw her. She had a wh ite, long-sleeved blouse on. Her wounds were much better, but still visible, so she preferred long-sleeves when she was around anyone else but us. She paired that with a pair. of black jeans. I was still in awe of how she could make a pair of jeans look so sexy so consistently. She wasn't one to put a ton of effort into her appearance and yet she was still the most beautiful woman in the room. I could tell that she'd showered and applied the smallest bit of makeup that she would wear. She still made my heart threaten to stop when I saw her.

I motioned for her to come to me. She glanced around at everyone else, nervously. She hesitated to come to me. I looked at her more sternly and motioned again for her to come to me. Viktor gently pushed her toward me. He knew I had made sure there was a chair for her, in case she decided to join the meeting.

I wanted to get up and show her how much I missed her at this moment, but that might be too much of a distraction. Most of the men weren't even paying attention and hadn't noticed her walk in and sit down next to me. I put my arm across her lap, happy to be touching her once again.

"Why would you be worried about that? They have a built-in customer base if they lease space in this building. They don't even need to do outside advertising. They can sustain their business strictly on the people in the building. That's a restaurant's wet dream." I tried to not laugh too loudly at what she just blurted out. "Oh sh it. I just said that out loud, didn't I?"

She was so adorable that I almost couldn't take it. I loved it when she said what was on her mind. She always had very valid points. Everyone else in the meeting was shocked at her presence, more than they were at what she said. While these guys were all seasoned businessmen, they've said much worse in meetings before.

I was going to have to convince her to come to all my meetings, if for no other reason than her comic relief, as well as her superb observation skills.

After talking with Stephen extensively about what happened when she smelled Vanessa's perfume in the elevator, he decided that there was some unconscious connection between both events that her subconscious had picked up on, but she wasn't necessarily aware of in her conscious mind. He tried to walk her through the day of the attack on her and Misha, asking her to think about every detail she could remember including sounds and smells that she might not have noticed the first time around. Not exactly a hypnosis but trying to pull more detailed memories out of her.

She did well until she got to the moment that the guy hit her and took her to the ground. We could all see her body start to shake as she relived that moment. It was clearly still traumatic for her, so Stephen stopped. He glanced to me and nodded his head toward her. I immediately went to her, wrapping my arms around her, pulling her into my lap. She sighed and relaxed as soon as she felt my arms around her. She opened her eyes, looking at me. I saw fear in her eyes. She had done such a good job of hiding it from me when it happened that I thought she was handling it well. I felt a pain in my chest thinking of how I'd let her down.

I kissed her forehead, holding her closer to me. She was still shaking, but it wasn't as bad as I'd felt it before. She inhaled. "I'm sorry. I didn't know this was going to happen."

"Shhh. Don't ever be sorry for this. Ever," I said, looking her in the eyes.

"This is your body's way of processing the trauma, Sephie. Do you know what rabbits do when they get away from a predator?" Stephen asked. She shook her head no. "They go to their den and do this very thing. They shake to process the trauma of narrowly escaping death. They let it happen, then pop up like nothing happened. If you don't let this happen, then you'll remain stuck in the moment of the trauma, if you will. Your body knows what it's doing. You're smart for not fighting it. You processed the night of the ball more than you ever did with the attack on you and Misha, but I doubt you're done completely with either."

"So, I have more of this to look forward to in my future?" she asked him.

"Don't sho ot the messenger, but yeah. More than likely," he said. He looked at her with a look of sympathy on his face.

"Awesome," she said. She tried to put on a brave face, but I could still see the fear behind her smile when she looked at me.

"I'll be right here with you, solnishko." I tightened my arms around her as she rested her head against my chest.

"Maybe next time if you're here with me, we won't have to stop." She looked up at me, like she was asking me if I would be willing to.

I couldn't help but smile at her. "Of course, my love. Like I would turn down an opportunity to have you in my arms."

She smiled at me, the fear dissolving for a moment.

"Let's give it a few days and then we can try it again. There's a connection between everything, we just have to find it," Stephen said. He looked to Misha. "Did you notice any strong smells the day you two were attacked?"

Misha thought for a moment. "No, I was focused on what I was feeling and the number of people that were suddenly around us. I don't remember anything else."

"Did you smell her perfume when she was here?" I asked. He shook his head no. "Go to the closet in the bedroom. There's a trash bag all the way at the back. It has the clothes we had on that day. You'll be able to smell it on the clothes. Just leave the bag where it is and close it back tight so Sephie can't smell it. I forgot to grab it this morning to throw it out. Guess that's a good thing."

Sephie looked at me, surprised. "I was only kidding when I said we needed to burn those clothes."

"You're not the only one that ha tes that smell, solnishko." I kissed her forehead.

Misha returned, a look of nausea on his face. "God, I forgot how much I hated that smell."

"More importantly, does it bring anything up for you?" Stephen asked.

Chapter One Hundred Nineteen

Adrik

Misha sat back down, exhaling. He was deep in thought for a few moments. I felt Sephie's fingers on my neck and chest, playing with my collar the way she did when I would carry her anywhere. Her head still resting on my chest. She sighed, her body. continuing to relax the longer we sat there.

"I get that familiar feeling that Sephie was talking about and I feel the same feeling of impending doom that I felt that day on the sidewalk right now," Misha finally said. "But I don't know if the familiar feeling is because we were all forced to smell that perfume for a few months or if it was something to do with the day of the attack. I did not see her on the sidewalk. At least I don't remember seeing her."

"It's possible she was there, just ahead of you, or she was a part of the sea of people that were suddenly around you two. It would've been difficult to pick her out of the crowd. The bigger question is whether she was there by chance or by design. And we still need to figure out the link to the ball. None of us saw her that night. We would've remembered that," Stephen said, scratching his chin.

"Maybe one of the women in the bathroom wore the same brand of perfume? If they said they knew one of Adrik's exes, then maybe it was Vanessa. Maybe they wear the same perfume? Although I don't know why you would double up on that hot mess of a scent," Sephie said, her fingers still lightly running over my neck, down my chest where my shirt was open. I wasn't sure if she knew she was driving me crazy and was enjoying it, or she had no idea. Either way, she was driving me crazy.

"That's entirely possible. That would explain why you remembered that exact moment in the elevator," Stephen said. "That's a satisfactory explanation for the night of the ball. There were a lot of people there, but we definitely would've seen Vanessa if she were there. I also can't see her getting an invitation to that event. It's, uh, a little above her," Stephen said, somewhat sheepishly.

Ivan chuckled. "It's a lot above her, let's be honest."

"I'm sure she's a perfectly nice girl. You know, when she's not trying to seduce other women's boyfriends," Sephie chuckled. She sat up straighter, stretching her back. I had pulled her sideways into my lap. I turned her so she could lean back against my chest and wrapped my arms around her waist. She held onto my arms around her, crossing her legs in between mine.

Ivan shook his head no. "You haven't seen her other side, princess. She's definitely not a nice girl. She's the opposite of a nice girl, especially with me."

Sephie looked at Ivan, "that's because your demons irritate her demons. That's your superpower, Squishy. Your demons bring out the worst in everyone, those parts that they try so hard to cover up, so others can see them the same way you do. You just need to remember that your demons work for you now instead of the other way around."

Ivan looked stunned. He thought for a moment, then a sly smile appeared on his face. "I feel vulnerably diagnosed, but you're right." He winked at her.

She giggled. "You're my favorite. Don't tell the others."

In unison, everyone else said, "hey!"

I was worried how Sephie would sleep that night, but she slept through the night with no issues. She spent the entire night on my chest, which may or may not have helped her avoid nightmares, but I wasn't complaining. I woke up several times, worried about her, and each time, she was still sleeping soundly on my chest. I wasn't going to risk moving her, so I would run my hands through her hair or over her back and would feel her snuggle into me more, which would help me drift back to sleep.

Three Days Later

Sephie was sitting in between my legs, leaning back against me, with my arms wrapped around her as Stephen tried once again to walk her through the day she and Misha were attacked. He put her into a deep meditative state, then walked her through the events leading up to the attack. This time, however, when they got to the moments just before they were both hit, her body stayed relaxed, allowing her to continue.

"Sephie, you see Misha just in front of you. He looks back to you, then what happens?" Stephen prompted her.

"I feel arms around me, pushing me to the ground. I feel my face smash against the concrete. I'm stunned, but I feel the arms loosen around me, so I flip over like Viktor showed me and get the person off me. I can see his eyes. There's something weird. about his eyes. He smells weird too. It doesn't match. He's wearing dirty clothes, like he might be homeless, but he smells like expensive perfume. I toss him off me. I can't find Misha at first, but then I see him punch the guy who attacked him. I see red at this point. It's like I'm not entirely in control of my body. I didn't think about jumping on the guy and punching him. I just did it. I was so angry that I wanted him dead in that moment. I feel someone pull me off, but I still can't see anything but red. I feel a hand on me, but this one doesn't make me mad. I can hear familiar voices, but it takes me a minute to snap out of it and see Misha in front of me. I realize it's his hand on me. That's why it didn't make me mad. Once I snap out of it, I start to feel the pounding in my head. I'm only vaguely aware that I'm bleeding. Misha keeps his hand on me. It's like a lifeline to reality. I close my eyes and I can smell that god awful perfume again. I open my eyes, but I can't see very clearly. All I can really focus. on is Misha's hand on me. It's keeping me here. I can see the darkness coming. I've seen it before many times. I know what it is. and what it does, but it stays back as long as Misha's hand is on me."

I glance in Misha's direction and his eyes are red. He had no idea he had this much of an effect on her that day. His jaw is clenched. I can tell he's fighting back breaking down. None of us knew she was struggling this much to stay conscious when it happened. It's a testament to her strength that she remained conscious as long as she did. I tighten my hold on her waist as I think about how incredibly strong she is for everything she's been through.

"I can vaguely remember the ride back to the penthouse. We got out and I was walking next to Ivan when the darkness took over. I reached for him, but I don't know if I made contact or not. Everything went dark. I feel really cold." She inhaled. I felt her tense and felt her body lightly shake, but it never got worse.

"Sephie, you did good. You're safe now. No one will hurt you like that ever again. Do you understand?" Stephen asked.

"I understand. Does Misha understand it wasn't his fault either? Does he understand that I would've killed that guy if he hadn't pulled me off him? Or how he kept the darkness away for so long?"

Misha put his head down, cursing. We saw his shoulders heave as the sobs racked his body.

"He knows now, Sephie. I want you to count backward from ten and when you get to one, you'll open your eyes and remember everything."

She counted and opened her eyes when she reached one. She looked to me first, but immediately searched for Misha. He still had his head down, still struggling with everything she had just sail. She jumped up and went to him, wrapping her arms around him. He held onto her as he sobbed. I felt the tears in my own eyes. None of us knew.

She was whispering to him, so that only he could hear. He would nod his head, then grab onto her tighter. They stayed like that for several minutes before he finally got control. She wiped his tears and kissed his cheek before walking back to me. She wiped. her own eyes once she turned away from Misha. I pulled her back down in my lap, holding her closely, and kissing her temple.

"I'm so sorry, solnishko. I didn't know. You hid it so well that we all thought you were handling it well. I had no idea." She didn't say anything, she just put her arms on top of mine and pulled my arms tighter around her.

"So, the connection to the smell was on the actual guy that attacked you. That means that he was close to either Vanessa or someone else that wears that exact brand and wears so much of it that it lingers on others. That narrows down the list of potential suspects to, well, Vanessa," Stephen said.

"Now we need to figure out whether she was there by chance or by design," Ivan said. "The tail we put on her hasn't come up with anything useful so far. She still loves to shop. That's all we know so far."

"Keep it on her. We know she's not the brightest. She might be trying to be careful right now, but that won't last. She'll slip up and give us something useful," I said.

"Did you at least tell whoever is following her to stay upwind from her?" Sephie asked. Right on time, she made us all laugh and forget about the growing conspiracy we were uncovering

Chapter One Hundred Twenty

Sephie

After Stephen helped me connect everything the day of the attack, I was mostly quiet for the rest of the evening. Adik kept me close, either in his lap or with his hands on me. It helped me stay calm. I really hadn't thought much about the attack after it happened. The concussion and resulting headaches took precedence over everything else. I didn't have much time to process It. before the ball and everything that happened there.

I didn't want anyone to know how badly I had wanted to ki ll the guy that hit me in that moment. Maybe that's why I didn't think about it or talk about it very much. I was worried they were going to look at me differently. I still hadn't remembered that I killed my uncle that night in the basement until the night of the ball when I was on the plane. I was struggling with my own feelings.

Once Adrik and I were alone, he looked at me thoughtfully. His fingers playing with the curls around my face. He loved to push them back from my face, only to have them return shortly after. He was fascinated by my hair having a mind of its own. I loved it. It would make me laugh that he thought he could tame my hair. I'd been trying for years now. It was a losing battle.

"I'm sorry I didn't know you were struggling so much with the attack on you and Misha. I let you down, solnishko."

I smiled at him, looking into his deep blue eyes that were filled with regret. "You didn't know. How can I be mad at you for not knowing something I didn't tell you? That doesn't make sense."

"Why didn't you tell anybody?"

I sighed. "I didn't want anyone to know that I really wanted to ki ll that guy that day and that I would have if Misha hadn't pulled me off him. I was worried that you all would look at me differently if you found out." I had looked down at the floor, not wanting to see his eyes right away when 1 admitted that. I felt his hand under my chin, lifting my gaze to look at him.

"Sephie, you know who we are, right? Of all the people in the world to understand that feeling, the six of us can understand that feeling. We don't think less of you because of that. It makes you more of a ba dass than you already are." He smiled at me, his blue eyes had that knowing look that he got every time I needed to search them. I looked for what I was always afraid of finding, but never did. He waited patiently, still fighting the losing battle with my curls, amusing himself at their persistence. He pressed his lips to mine. "It's also sexy as f uck," he said, smiling against my lips.

I couldn't help but laugh at him. I climbed back into his lap, wanting to be close to him again. He willingly opened his arms for me, wrapping me in his embrace. I loved the feeling of safety I had whenever I was in his arms. With him, it didn't feel like he was keeping the darkness away. It was more like he commanded the darkness. It was there, but it was bent to his will, allowing me to stay safe anytime I was surrounded by it. I could feel his warmth stay with me anytime I felt the cold void try to take over.

"I love you, Adrik. Always and forever." My fingers were running over his neck and down his chest where his shirt was open. I felt his breath hitch as he held me tighter.

"I love you, solnishko. I will always be here for you. No matter what happens."

Two Weeks Later

We were in Adrik's office. He was working on things at his desk, while I had found a book to read on the couch. The guys were busy on various tasks, so it was just the two of us. I would catch him looking at me every so often. Each time, it would make me smile and I could almost see his heart skip a beat.

Armando walked into the office with Giana. "Ah, Sephle, I was hoping you would be here too," I stood up to greet his open

* Makh, to are you today? How are you, Giana? Settling in the better?" I asked.

Armando vald. That's what I was hoping to talk to you about. I was hoping maybe you two could go for a girl's day or something thet be out of the building for a while, maybe?

d thought tot a minute, glancing toward Adik, who looked slightly used. He already knew that I had no idea what a girl's day meant. I suckdenly had an idea, though.

W course, we can. I just neest to find one of the guys." Altik cleated his throat. I looked toward him.

"AL borst box, preferably three," he said, a stern look on his face that told me there was no use arguing with him on this. I simply nodded my head. He picked up his phone, spoke in Russia, then hung up. "They'll be here shortly." He stood up, walking toward me. He pulled his wallet from his pants, handing his credit card. "Use this on whatever you like."

"Don't tell me that. I'll come back with a pony. Don't tempt me," said, laughing.

He laughed, kissing my forehead. "We'll find a place for it. Don't worry." But then he looked at me with the same stern look on his lace "I want you to spend money on clothes, if you need then He leaned down, his lips to my car, "you should think about getting a few skirts. Easter access." He winked at me, leaving me completely flustered.

Ivan, Misha, and Andrei showed up a few minutes later, ready to escort us to wherever we wished to go that day. When we were in the elevator, I hit the button for the 5th floor. I looked at Gianja, grimming. "I'm going to be honest here, I generally fail miserably at the whole being a normal girl routine. I'm going to need help on what to do here, but I have just the right secret weapon for this."

The guys all started laughing, knowing exactly what I was talking about.

"Giana, what are your feelings on Bingo?" Misha asked her, his wide smile across his face. Her cheeks flushed slightly when he smiled at her. She looked flustered for a moment, but eventually admitted that she didn't know what Bingo was.

I surprised all three of them by telling them, in Russian, to be nice. Ms. Jackson had been secretly teaching me Russian and I'd been picking it up along the way, anytime they spoke it in front of me. I was nowhere near fluent in it, but I could pick up and say small phases. Their eyes went wide. Ivan grinned at me, "you ever cease to amaze us, princess."

We knocked on Ms. Jackson's door. I hadn't told her we were coming, but I had a feeling she would be up for an adventure, especially with these three in tow.

"Oh my! Is it my birthday already? It feels like my birthday," she did when she opened the door. Even Giana laughed at her response.

"Ms. Jackson, would you be interested in a girl's day out with us?admittedly have no idea what that means and I'm really hoping you do, so please say yes," I said, laughing.

"Oh, child, you don't have to ask me twice. Let me get my purse." She walked into her apartment. We heard her say loudly, "can we swing by Edith's place this time?"

The guys just laughed. "Wherever you like, Ms. Jackson," Ivan said. "It's time we test her pacemaker."

Chapter One Hundred Twenty One

Sephie

Ms. Jackson assured us that we would need manicures and pedicures before starting the day out. This was going to Be a first. I mean, I painted my toes. It was like the one girly thing I did, but I'd never had someone else do it. She asked Giana if she needed to do any shopping. She nodded toward me. "I know that one ha tes shopping, but I get the sense that you might enjoy It. You know, like a normal girl." Giana laughed and nodded her head. Ms. Jackson nodded her head toward me. "I know just the spot. We're going to have to force that child to look at clothes, but between the two of us, we can do it."

I caught Ivan's gaze in the rear-view mirror. "I thought she was going to help me, not torture me. Save me." He shook his head, shifting his gaze back to the road. They were going to enjoy watching me be tortured today.

Ms. Jackson became the activities coordinator for the day. She knew exactly where to go for everything and gave the orders like she had been born into this role. First stop, the nail salon. She told the guys where to drive us, assuring me we would not need an appointment. "Honey, they know me there and you don't even know it, but they know you too. Trust me, Giana is going to get the royal treatment there today." She looked at Ivan, saying, "and it's easily protected, so you fine gentlemen will be happy."

He chuckled, "much appreciated. The princess is enough to handle on her own, much less you and her together. Thank you for making our job slightly easier, Ms. Jackson."

"Flattery will get you everywhere, Ivan."

I wasn't completely sure, but I think I noticed Ivan blush.

Ms. Jackson walked into the nail salon first. She scanned the room, finding the person she was looking for. Just as Ms. Jackson said, "there she is" the woman looked up to see her. The woman get up from her seat, coming to Ms. Jackson immediately.

"Ms. Jackson! I wasn't expecting you for another week. What bring you here early?"

"Oh, Anna, I have a treat for you today. I finally managed to get Sephie here, with her friend Giana," she said, looking to me. 1 was surprised, as I had no idea this place even existed before today. How was this a "finally managed to get me here" situation? Anna looked right at me, her warm smile putting me somewhat at ease. "You must be Sephie. My husband has told me so much. about you. I'm going to have to yell at him though. You're even more beautiful than he said." She offered me her hand to shake.

"Your husband?" I asked, completely confused, but still taking her hand to shake it.

"Vinny," she said, smiling.

"Oh! Oh my God, bring it in. Come on. You're practically family at this point. Your husband changed my life. Seriously." I hugged her, not even caring if she wanted to be hugged or not. I already knew I loved this woman, simply by her choice in a husband.

Surprisingly, Glana spoke up, beside me. "THE Vinny? The sandwich Vinny?" she asked. Anna laughed, nodding her head. Giana said, rather seriously, "you're a very lucky woman." Anna's cheeks Jushed as she smiled at us.

"He'll be so happy to know that you all think so highly of him. And that I finally got to meet you, Miss Sephie. He speaks fondly of you often. You're one of his favorite customers. And, of course, we're still so grateful to your boyfriend. He's a saint." It was my turn to have flushed cheeks. It always made me happy to know that people loved Adrik.

"Turns out, we're both very lucky women," I winked at Anna.

Anna insisted on getting us in right away and taking care of our every need. Giana knew exactly what to do and what was happening next, but they both had to fill me in on the process. I was so clueless. This is going to be a long day.

When we were close to being finished, Anna tried to refuse payment. She said the same deal applied here as at Vinny's sandwich shop. I caught Ivan and quietly told him to go to the front and buy whatever he could and leave a very substantial tip with Adrik's credit card. He understood and disappeared immediately. He showed up a few minutes later and simply nodded his head. I signed a "thank you" to him and continued listening to Ms. Jackson and Giana talk about where we were going next.

"Sephie, child, don't you want some different clothes?" Ms. Jackson asked.

I looked at Ivan, who was closest to us. "Is she implying that there is something wrong with the way I dress? I think she is." He chuckled, shrugging his shoulders.

"Oh, child. You dress fine. For a high school student. You need to branch out from jeans, dear. I feel like today might be my only chance to get you in a skirt or some dress pants, at the very least," she said.

I laughed. "I can't argue with your points, Ms. Jackson. But in my slight defense, I never needed to worry about my wardrobe as a waitress."

"Well, you're not one anymore, so it's time you start dressing the part. You have a namesake to live up to, child."

I just shook my head. I knew she was right, but I never really gave it any thought. I also tried to dress in a way that wouldn't garner extra attention from people. I was slightly nervous about what Ms. Jackson had in mind, but I trusted her. Mostly. At least Adrik will be happy.

The longer we were out, the more animated and open Giana became. She was funny in her own right, and we ended up laughing with Ms. Jackson about many things throughout the day. I found myself enjoying being around her, which was a new experience for me. I'd always struggled to be friends with girls.

I was curious about her feelings about Armando, as I'd watched her staring at Misha every chance she got throughout the day, but I didn't want to ask in front of the guys. Leave it to Ms. Jackson to ask the perfect question when we were out of earshot of the guys.

"Giana, dear, you're going to stare holes in the back of Misha's head if you don't give it at least a little bit of a rest. I mean, I understand. He's a gorgeous human. But we're going to need to work on your subtlety."

Giana's cheeks immediately went red. "Oh my God, I didn't realize it was that obvious."

I laughed, remembering her in the conference room in Italy. "He's been aware of it since we were in Italy, Giana."

I didn't think her cheeks could get any redder, but they proved me wrong. She covered her face with her hands, completely embarrassed.

"What about Mando, though? I've seen the way he looks at you," I said, trying to feel her out.

She sighed, a small smile crept across her face. "He's my boss though. If it didn't work out, I would be out of a job, and I really need this weird job."

"But be's such a nice guy, he would still make sure you were taken care of. As long as you don't sleep with other men while you're with him. If you do that, he'll let other women wear your clothes," I said. She flinched

Chapter One Hundred Twenty Two

Sephie

She thought for a few minutes, Ms. Jackson watching her lost in her thoughts. “Child, when you think about Misha do you get butterflies and your heart rates?” Ms. Jackson asked her.

Glana thought for a moment, then nodded her head. “He’s really Jndsome.”

Ms. Jackson chuckled. “They all are. Now, when you think about the Armando, do you get butterflies and does your heart race?”

Glana thought for a moment more, but this Time she shook her head no. “No, Armando is different. I think because he’s my boss, I’ve never let myself think about him like that. I just think him as my boss.”

“Were you intimidated by him when you first started working for him? You had to have known who he is when you took the job, right?” I asked. I was almost certain I knew where Ms. Jackson was going with her line of questioning here.

“No, he’s always been so nice to me. Like overly so. He never says anything when I’m late either and I’m late all the time,” she said.

Ms. Jackson looked at her, somewhat sternly. “That’s a sign that your body is giving you that Misha is not the one for you. Everyone gets it backward and goes for the butterflies and racing pulse, but the ones we’re meant to be with will bring you calm. A familiarity, if you will. You’ll feel like you’ve known them for years after just a few days.”

Glana thought for a moment, then looked to me. “Is that how it happened with you and Ghost?”

I nodded. “The first time I saw him, I saw Viktor and Andrei walk in first. I mean, they’re giant and they’re both very attractive men, but I felt nervous looking at them. When I saw Ghost walk in and even more so when he looked at me, I felt a weird calm. come over me. There’s a pull between us too that has always been there. Like anytime we’re apart, there’s a pull toward the other until we’re together again.”

Giana’s eyes got wide. “I couldn’t figure out why I missed him when he was away for a few days. I felt like a weirdo for it.”

“I bet if I asked him about his time away, he would likely say the same thing,” I said. I laughed, “what’s your opinion of Ivan now that you’ve spent more time around him?”

“He still scares the shi t out of me, and I like him much more when you’re around, but he’s not as scary as I originally thought. I can see he’s just doing his job, which he’s admittedly very good at, she said.

I raised my eyebrow. This one might have potential.

Ms. Jackson crossed her arms across her chest. “You’ve just said everything you need to know, my dear. If Sephie sees that Armando looks at you differently, then there’s something there on his end too. Not much, if anything, gets by Sephie.” She Jooked at me proudly.

“But I can’t make the first move on my boss!” Glana said.

“Oh, leave it to me. I’ll drop a hint and he’ll do the rest,” I said, smiling at her.

We were walking to the last shop of the day. Thank God, my feet hurt and my hip is starting to really hurt. How do women shop like this all the time? Ms. Jackson and Giana were busy talking about something fashion related as we walked down the sidewalk. I was busy daydreaming about getting back to Adrik soon. I was trying to hide it, but my limp was coming back. Giana and Ms.

Jackson were having such a good time that I didn’t want to rain on their parade by having to go back to the penthouse.

Ivan was on one side of us, Misha on the other, with Andrei following behind. I heard him say something to Misha in Russian, so Giana wouldn’t understand. Misha, who was next to me, looked down as we continued walking. He leaned closer to me, quietly saying, “I can give you a ride, gazelle. Boss will ki ll us if we bring you back broken.“

“Holy shi t, I love you so much right now.” I looked over my shoulder, pointing to Andrei. “You too, Bubba. I know this was your idea. We stopped, Misha squatted down for me, and Andrei was behind me to pick me up. The other three didn’t even notice we had stopped and we were back beside them, just with me on Misha’s back. Ivan looked over, raising an eyebrow. I mouthed. “hip.” He nodded his head and continued on.

I whispered into Misha’s ear, “I am the go ddamn princess right now.” He laughed loudly, causing the two girls to look our way. I hugged his neck a little tighter, enjoying our inside jokes. I looked at Ms. Jackson and Giana. “What? I don’t see how women do this regularly. It’s excruciating.” Both laughed at me, but I didn’t care. I was happy to not be limping right now. I felt Misha squeeze my legs a little tighter. “They clearly don’t know that I’m the go ddamn princess,” I whispered in his ear.

I was so tired by the time we got to the shop that I sat on a bench with Andrei while the other two girls did their shopping. Ms. Jackson was pulling out clothes for me. I didn’t want to try on anything; she knew my sizes and was shopping for me. At this point, I didn’t care anymore. I’d already bought more clothes in one day than I had in the last three years, combined. I had plenty. Armando must’ve also given Giana his card because she was going crazy.

I sighed, resting my head on Andrei’s shoulder. “You okay, spider monkey?”

“I don’t get women. I feel like I’m a complete weirdo when it comes to being a woman. None of this interests me in the least. I don’t get it, either. Like we all know they’re putting this much effort into looking good for other women, not men. Most guys don’t care this much what women wear. Or don’t wear. It’s more for other women, so we can all judge each other on superficial attributes and pretend rules that we somehow silently agreed upon as a gender centuries ago.”

He laughed. “That’s one reason why we all love you so much. You don’t play by their rules. It’s also what makes most women hate you, for the record. They don’t know they don’t have to play by the rules, and it irritates them that you don’t.”

I slid my arm through his, squeezing his giant bicep. “You’re so smart, Bubba. Don’t let anybody tell you you’re just a pretty face.”

He looked at me sideways. “Who said I had a pretty face?”

I laughed. It was the exact response I was expecting. I winked at him. “You do have a pretty face. Tori doesn’t know what she messed up. You deserve so much better.” I felt his other hand on top of mine. He leaned over and kissed the top of my head.

“You’re my favorite, spider monkey.”

“You’re mine. Don’t tell the others.” He laughed, knowing by this point that I said that to all of them

Chapter One Hundred Twenty Three

Sephie

Ms. Jackson and Giana finally had their fill of shopping, so we headed back to the penthouse, I was exhausted at this point. I rarely took baths, but I found myself wanting to take a very long bath when we got back. We had a short distance to walk to get back to the vehicles. Andrei offered to carry me this time. I was enjoying taking in the scene ahead of us from my new, higher perspective. They were all several inches taller than me. The air fell different up here.

We were almost to the vehicles when I spotted a familiar face ahead of us. “Hey, that’s Max!” I said, watching as he was standing outside a shop, on his phone. He hadn’t seen us yet. I asked Ivan if I could go talk to him. He thought for a moment. “Boss wants us back.” He said the word for news in Russian, with his eyebrow raised to see if I comprehended. I nodded, but still wanted to see Max. I hadn’t seen him since before the ball. He saw my face and said, “Misha, stay with Sephie and Andrei. I will take them to get a vehicle and come back and get you so we can pick the other vehicle up. Boss was adamant that we return soon, so be quick,” he looked to me, a stern look on his face.

“Squishy, if I had control of my legs right now, I would hug you. You’re my favorite. Don’t tell the others,” I said, laughing. He just shook his head as he ushered Ms. Jackson and Giana toward the vehicles.

We got closer to Max, who still wasn’t paying attention and hadn’t seen us. I tapped Andrei’s shoulder for him to set me down. I walked up to Max, before he saw me, and said, “are you going to give me a hug or are you just going to stand there and stare at your phone like a weirdo all day?”

He looked up, completely surprised to see me. “Gingersnap! I haven’t seen you in literally forever! Where have you been?” He wrapped his arms around me, hugging me tightly. I felt Andrei and Misha both step closer to me when Max’s arms were around me. They were good at their job, dammit.

“That’s too long of a story. I only have a few minutes before I have to go, but I saw you and wanted to say hi. I miss you, Maximus. You good? Everything good?” I asked.

“I’m good.” He nodded toward Andrei and Misha. “I see your trained killers are still with you. That’s good. We like that. Nothing to see here, fellas,” he said as he started petting my head. I laughed, smacking his hand away.

“How’s the restaurant?”

“It’s good. Mostly the same. It sucks without you there, though. We got a new cook. A chick. She’s actually pretty cool. She’s in that shop, actually. I got bored, so I came out here. I don’t get how women love to shop so much,” he said, shaking his head.

“I don’t either, Max. I don’t either. Are you dating a coworker now? What’s her name?” I asked, surprised.

“I mean, I guess so? Weird, right? She’s only been there a couple weeks, but she’s been cool. Granted, I’ve had Kim to deal with since you left, so it might be that my standards have lowered significantly.” We both laughed. He continued, “but Tori is cool.”

I heard Andrei curse under his breath behind me. I suddenly wanted to leave very quickly. I saw Misha move to block me, visually, from the shop we were standing in front of. I knew what he was doing and appreciated it. I felt Andrei’s hand on the small of my back, ready for anything.

“Um, odd question, Max. but does Tori know you know me? Have you ever mentioned me to her?” I asked. I had no idea where that question came from, but I almost felt compelled to ask it.

“I think so? I probably told her some hilarious story about you because I have a million of those,”

“Before or after you started dating her?”

I’m not sure. Why is this important?”

“Max, you have to break up with her. I’ve never come between you and any girl in the past, but this one is bad news. Please trust me. She doesn’t have good intentions toward you if she knows you’re friends with me. If you’ve ever listened to anything I’ve ever told you, please listen to this.”

Just then, Ivan pulled up to the curb. Max was still looking at me, stunned. Andrei grabbed me around the waist lifting me off the ground, not giving me a choice to stay. He climbed into the front seat, pulling me into his lap. Misha jumped in the back, next to Giana.

As soon as the doors closed, Ivan pulled away. I looked at Andrei, still somewhat shocked. Ivan knew there was something wrong, asking Andrei what happened in Russian. His cheeks were red, he was still angry at her. I looked at Ivan and said, “Tori.” He cut his eyes toward me but didn’t ask anything further. He would wait until we were alone to ask more questions. Instead of going to get the other vehicle, he drove back to the penthouse. “Boss has called three times in the last half hour. We need to get back.”

I was starting to worry about why he wanted us back so badly. “Is everything okay? Why does he want us back so quickly?” Ivan cut his eyes to me, a smirk on his face. He didn’t need to answer. I knew the answer. He missed me.

We dropped Ms. Jackson and Giana off on the 5th floor. They both turned toward Ms. Jackson’s apartment. It made me happy that they had each found a friend today.

Once the elevator doors closed, I leaned back against the wall, trying to find some relief for my hip. “FUCK I HATE SHOPPING.”

Everyone laughed. Ivan slid his arm around my shoulders. “This is why we love you, princess.”

I cleared my throat, looking at Misha. “Goddamn princess to you, thank you very much.”

Through his laughter, Ivan asked, “what’s this about Tori today?”

I looked at him, deadpan. “She’s dating Max. Apparently, she got a job as a cook at the restaurant where I met you guys. I asked Max if she knew that he was friends with me. He said he probably told her some story about me but couldn’t remember if it was before or after they started dating. My best guess is that it was before. Max doesn’t have many rules, but not dating coworkers. was one he always followed. Always. This is Tori going after him, if they’re dating. Maybe it’s just a rebound for her, but I can’t help but be worried she’s going to try to do him dirty to get back at me.”

He blew his breath out loudly while pulling on his goatee. “Yikes. Did you see her today?”

I shook my head no, but looked to Misha. “Did you see her in the shop?”

He nodded. “She didn’t see us while we were talking to Max. She might’ve seen us leaving, but that’s it.”

The doors pinged. I groaned as I stood up to walk out of the elevator. I didn’t get more than one step and Ivan had scooped me up, carrying me to Adrik’s office. “Come on, you goddamn princess, your goddamn prince awaits.”

Chapter One Hundred Twenty Four

Sephie

Adrik looked concerned when he saw us walk into his office. He immediately stood and came toward us. Ivan set me down, so Adrik could have access to me. “Solnishko, what happened? Are you okay?” He put his hands on my shoulders, holding me at arm’s length to look me over.

I chuckled. “Please say no the next time someone wants me to go shopping or anything closely related to a girl’s day out. Just flat out tell them I’m not allowed to go. I promise I won’t argue. I licking ha te shopping. It was endless. They wouldn’t stop. They’d still be going if you hadn’t called. It was torture. My hip is hicking killing me now.”

He cursed under his breath as he bent down and picked me up. He walked me to the couch, sitting with me in his lap. I sighed. as I leaned against him, happy to be sitting and happier to be in his arms. The guys were still mostly amused at my response to shopping.

Ivan looked at Viktor and Stephen. “You should’ve heard her in the elevator when we got rid of the other two. She really ha tes shopping.”

“The Devil invented shopping. That was the forbidden fruit. I know it. Eve fu cked us all with her weird need to try on every article of clothing known to man.”

They all laughed. Adrik kissed my cheek, a somewhat surprised lock on his face. “I didn’t know I should’ve put a time limit on how long you could stay gone.”

“Yes. Give me a curfew next time. Twenty minutes, tops. Then I have to be back. This is a good plan. You’re a genius.” I grabbed his face with both hands and kissed him.

They were all still laughing at my anger over shopping all day long It was funny, admittedly, but I was going to pay for it tomorrow.

I looked at Adrik. “Did you really have news or you just said that to get us back here? Either way, bless you.”

He chuckled. “I do have news, but I’ll keep that in mind the next time I need you back here quickly.” He winked at me. “I spoke with the Colombians today. Trino called me not long after you guys left.”

I looked at him, curiously. “Have they met with Lorenzo and Anthony?”

He laughed. “They did, but not before making them wait for two and a half weeks.”

“Seriously? Have they been in South America waiting since they left Sicily?” Ivan asked, surprised.

“It appears so,” Adrik said, still chuckling. “Trino said they had heard about the attempt on my life at the ball, but he didn’t believe it. He was contacted by Anthony a few days after, wanting to have a meeting about a new deal with him, Lorenzo, and Salvadori. Trino told them to come to Colombia, then made them wait while he investigated whether I was still alive or not. He couldn’t confirm it until we came back to the city, which is why he made Lorenzo and Anthony wait that whole time. Once Trino knew I was still alive, he knew Lorenzo and Anthony were up to no good. He met with thern, under the pretense that I was dead. He said either they don’t know for sure either, or they were trying hard to sell it to him, because they acted as if 1 was dead. They gave him a story about another boss being killed overseas, as well, which meant the city was in chaos and they were trying to restore order, which is why they were coming to him. They’re trying to align with him, hoping he can help them restore order.”

“He’s going to help them?” I asked.

“He’s going to make them belleve he’s helping them. Trino is a very smart man. He’s trying to be as legitimate of a businessman as Armando and me. He would’ve seen through their story even without doing his due diligence to see if I was still alive or not. Tring has people throughout the city. That was part of the deal he made with me. He said there were a few bosses that he didn’t trust and wanted his people to be able to keep an eye on them. I agreed to it and made very lucrative terms for him so he would remain loyal to me. No one knows the actual terms of our deal, so Lorenzo and Anthony didn’t come close to matching It with the deal they offered him. He told them he would consider and get back to them. They’re still down there.”

“Do they really think Armando is dead too?” I asked, not totally comprehending how sloppy they were being.

“I’m not sure on that one. They likely didn’t wait around to see if the explosion was successful or not. I’m also not convinced the lawyer told them about you and I. Trino seemed pretty convinced that they believed I was dead, and you were in the wind.” He had started playing with the curls around my face as he talked, wrapping and unwrapping them lightly around his finger. I closed my eyes, feeling exhausted, but still wanting to hear the details.

“How long does Trino have to give them an answer?” Ivan asked.

“He said he’s supposed to give them an answer by the end of the week, so three days,” Adrik said, still wrapping and unwrapping.

“I think we should create a bit of our own chaos, Boss.” Ivan said.

“How so?” Adrik asked, genuinely intrigued.

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“I wonder if Dario and Massimo know that they’re meeting with the Colombians. It doesn’t make sense to me that Dario is working with Salvadori. Armando was right those two ha te each other and have for years. I think Dario and Massimo are quietly trying to form their own faction, if you will. Let’s see if they contact Trino, after they find out that Lorenzo and Anthony are down there. Maybe we can get them to take care of each other, Ivan said, his hands running over his dark goatee. “Or at the very least, take one faction out, so we have less to worry about!”

“Squishy, if I haven’t told you this lately, I’m telling you now, I fu cking love your brain. You, sir, are diabolical and I am fu cking here for it. I would high five you but you’re so far away and I’m a go ddamn princess that can’t be bothered to walk on my own.”

They all laughed. Ivan got up and came to the couch, just to give me a high five.

Viktor’s deep voice interjected over the laughter. “I don’t know, sestrichka, you’re extra funny when you’re cranky from having to go shopping all day. You might have to do it more for our benefit.”

“Viktor, we don’t use that kind of language in this house.” I looked at him as sternly as I could, before laughing.

More laughter, as they enjoyed not being the targets of my anger this time around.

As the laughter died down, Adrik was deep in thought. “I think that’s a good plan, Ivan. Armando can plant the seed with Dario and Massimo, then we’ll see what they do with the information.

Chapter One Hundred Twenty Five

Sephie

When Adrik and I went to the penthouse later that evening, all the items I'd been talked into buying had been delivered. There were quite a few bags just inside the door. Adrik smiled when he saw them. “I'm glad you bought a few things. I hope you bought more panties,” he said, his eyebrow raised.

“Well, if someone would stop insisting on ripping them off, I wouldn't have to replace them in bulk.” I went to pick up the bags. to take them to the closet. Instead, he picked me up and carried me to the bedroom.

“Leave those. You need to soak in a bath. I don't like that your limp is back.”

“You read my mind. Don't we have to change my bandage tonight anyway?” He nodded his head as he put me down on the bed.

“Ivan told me to leave the bandage off for a few hours this time. He said to let it dry out and then put the regular honey and bandage back on it. It's healing well still, but it's still slow. He said this might help speed it up,” he said as he went to turn the water on in the bathroom.

“I'd be fine with leaving the bandage off for longer than a few hours. The adhesive is really irritating. That hurts worse than the hole in my hip most days.”

“I think you will be able to do that soon, solnishko. Maybe a few more days of the bandage and it'll be small enough that you can go without the bandage.” He pulled my shirt over my head, as yawned. I was so tired. I fell back on the bed, not wanting to make any more effort than absolutely necessary for the rest of the night. I heard him chuckle as he unbuttoned my jeans. “It was really that bad today?”

I laughed. “No, Well, yes. But I am being a tad overdramatic about it all. I think I'm so cranky because my hip hurts so much. If that didn't hurt, I probably wouldn't have cared to keep going.” He pulled my jeans off, pulling me up to undo my bra. “I saw Max today,” I said as he pulled me up from the bed.

“Oh, yeah? You guys went to the restaurant?” He asked, surprised.

“No. God, no. He was on the sidewalk as we were walking back to the vehicles. Well, everyone else was walking. I was being carried like the goddamn princess I am,” I said laughing.

He pulled my panties down, making sure that I noticed he didn't rip them off, which made me laugh more. “How is Max?” he asked as he scooped me up to take me to the bathroom. He set me down on the counter so he could remove my bandage as the tub continued to fill.

“He's good, but you won't believe this.” He stopped to look at me smiled at him, “he's dating Tori now.”

“What?!” he exclaimed, completely surprised.

“That was my first reaction as well, but something seems fishy about it. Until I met you, I spent the most time with Max. Well, when he wasn't seeing anyone seriously. He was probably the best friend I had at the time. He told me that Tori got a job at the restaurant, which isn't completely out of the realm of possibility. She's a chet. It's a restaurant. Makes sense, right?” He nodded as he picked me up from the counter and took me to the tub. He set me down so I could sit in the hot water. I waited for him to get in behind me as I continued my thoughts, “but Max and I have a bunch of stupid, hilarious stories from working together for so many years. I would be willing to bet he told her a story about me. Max has very few rules, but not dating coworkers was always one that he stuck to. Religiously. If they're dating, she would've had to initiate it. I just don't think she has good Intentions toward him.”

“Did you see Tori today?” he asked as he sat down behind me, pulling me back against him. The bath got instantly warmer as soon as I leaned back against his chest. I sighed, feeling my body relax at the warmth, as well as at his touch.

“I didn't see her. Misha said he saw her in the store, but doesn't think she ever saw us. Poor Andrei was so angry after we left.”

“Did you tell Max that you knew her?”

“We didn't have much time to talk. Ivan left Misha and Andrei with me, and he took Ms. Jackson and Giana to get one of the vehicles. He was on his way back, so I had time to ask a few questions about whether she knew that he was friends with me and if she knew before or after they started dating. I told him to get rid of her, that she was bad news, but he's literally never listened to any advice I've given him on girls. Ever. I don't see why he would start now.”

He was quiet for a moment. “I know he's your friend and I know I keep saying this, but he's not a smart man, Sephie. If he can't see that you have his best intentions in mind, then he deserves everything that Tori does to him.”

I sighed. “I know you're right. I guess I'm just worried that this is going to be the one time he doesn't come back. Every time he would choose another girl over hanging out with me, I always worried it would be the last time. At some point, he's going to find a lasting relationship and then he'll forget all about me. It doesn't hurt as much now that I have you and the guys, but it still hurts.”

He wrapped his arms around my waist, as he kissed my neck.

“Some people are in our lives forever, some for just a few chapters. Maybe his chapters are coming to a close,” he said, holding me tighter.

I wrapped my arms around his, lacing my fingers through his. “At least I have six more that will be there until the last page.”

“Always. We will always choose you.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 126

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Chapter One Hundred Twenty Six

Adrik

I woke the next morning to find Sephle in her favorite spot. She was snoring softly, her fingers playing on my chest. I ran my hand over her back. She simply snuggled into me more, without waking. She was exhausted after shopping all day the day before. She was also adorable when she was cranky from shopping all day long. We all got more enjoyment out of her crankiness than we probably should have, but we couldn’t help it. She was hilarious, especially when her crankiness wasn’t directed at any of us.

I kissed the top of her head, picking her up slightly so I could get up. It was rare for her to not wake up when I moved, so I knew she needed the sleep. I quietly went about getting ready. I needed to meet with Armando this morning. He needed to let It slip to Dario and Massimo that Anthony and Lorenzo had indeed met with the Colombians and had gotten their support. Then we would wait and see what Dario and Massimo did with that information. If Ivan was correct, they would likely try to meet with the Colombians as well. I would make a call to Trino to inform him of this move as well, so he’d be ready. I trusted him, but I found myself wishing that Sephie could see him to get her opinion of him. Right now, that was out of the question, but perhaps we could arrange for her to meet him at some point.

I was ready to leave and Sephie still hadn’t woken up. I left her a note, as usual, and leaned down to kiss her, as well as cover her up so she wouldn’t get cold. The weather was starting to get cooler outside. She liked sleeping in my long-sleeved shirts. more now.

I met Viktor in my office. “Sephie’s still tired from shopping, isn’t he?” he asked, still laughing about the evening before.

I looked at him, amused as well. “She didn’t even need triple strength tea this time. She really was exhausted. Can you have one of the guys go up and wait for her to wake up again?”

He nodded, pulling his phone out of his pocket. He typed a few words, then put it back in his pocket.

Ivan walked in with Armando. “Good morning, Boss,” Armando said as he walked in. “Is Sephie not with you? I need to thank her for yesterday. Giana was so happy when she got back last evening.”

Ivan and Viktor both chuckled, knowing Sephie did not share the same sentiment. “She’s still upstairs, but I will make sure she gets the message,” I said.

“Giana introduced me to Ms. Jackson, as well. She said she spent the day with them as well. She’s quite the woman,” he said, running his hand through his hair.

I smiled at him. “Did she threaten your life?” He nodded. “Don’t worry, that means she likes you,” I said, putting my hand on his shoulder.

“I’m going to have to figure out how you surround yourself with such interesting women,” he said, laughing.

“It’s not me. Ms. Jackson came with Sephie. It’s all her.” I smiled to myself, thinking about how lucky I was to have her in my life. We quickly got down to business, discussing Anthony and Lorenza meeting with Trino. I explained Ivan’s plan to see if we could pit those two against Dario and Massimo, using the Colombians as the bait, basically.

“I like that plan,” Armando said, nodding toward Ivan. “It’s possible they’ll take care of each other for us.

Exactly,” Ivan said.

“I can make a call to Dario and Massimo and ask them to meet, see if they’ve heard anything from their guys, and tell them my guys found out about the deal they made with Trino. I still can’t imagine that Dario is working with Sal. I could be wrong, but those two have hated each other for so long. I can’t see them putting that to rest. What did Sephle say they do again when they’re lying?” Armando asked.

“Dario will repeat the question back to you, like he’s buying himself time to think of an answer. Massimo doesn’t blink. At all,” I said.

He nodded. “She’s like having a secret weapon. She should meet Trino too, just to be safe.”

I chuckled. “I had thought of that, yes. Not right now, but it’s a possibility in the future.”

“I’ll set something up and meet with them today,” he said.

“I’ll send a few of my people with you. They all know my guys, but I can send other security with you that they won’t recognize as mine, just to make sure you’re safe. We need to work on getting you your own security detail. Viktor can help you set that up and get guys trained,” I said.

“Thank you, Boss. I was going to ask you about that. I have admittedly been very relaxed about that over the last few years. It was just me to worry about, so I didn’t worry. Now I want to make sure Giana is safe,” he said.

I raised an eyebrow, remembering what Sephie had told me about Giana last night. He had a faraway look in his eye, like he was lost in thought. I remained silent, allowing his mind to drift wherever it wished. He slowly drifted back to reality, realizing that we were all looking at him. I’m not sure I’ve ever seen his cheeks so red. “You don’t need to explain the need to protect someone to me,” I said, a small smirk on my face.

He exhaled, still slightly embarrassed. He stood, mumbling something about calling Dario and Massimo. “I’ll let you know the plans to meet with them so we can arrange security.” He extended his hand to me, saying, “I also want to thank you for letting us stay here, so Giana is safe and I don’t need to worry about her, didn’t realize how worried I was about her since the explosion. And, please, give my thanks again to Sephie for yesterday. Giana was very happy last night. She had a great time. She loves Sephie and she even said Ivan is slightly less scary now.” He said, laughing. He walked out of the office to make the necessary arrangements.

I looked to Ivan, my eyebrow raised. “Giana is alright. She’s funny in her own right. She’s a very quiet girl, but she has potential. It’s pretty obvious Armando is practically in love with her, and I’d be willing to bet very good money that she feels the same way about him.”

“Interesting.” I said. Sephie would be happy to hear of Armando’s reaction to Giana’s safety

Chapter One Hundred Twenty Seven

Adrik

I made a call to Trino, Informing him about our plan to see if Darid and Massimo would also contact him. He agreed that it was a good plan. He was still making Anthony and Lorenzo wait for an answer for another few days. “I know it’s a di ck move, but it’s really fun, man. They just wait like little puppy dogs for me to talk to them. I made them wait for weeks, Jefe!” He was laughing so hard on the other end of the phone that he couldn’t speak. I enjoyed Trino. He was a typical Spanish man. Very flamboyant with his wealth and just as likely to cuss you out as he was to help you out. He was passionate in everything he did, but he loved his family, and he took care of his city, Rules were different in South America. They played a little dirtier than we did, but he had brought order to the chaos once he took over the cartels in Colombia. They’d enjoyed many years of peace under him. The people loved him because of it.

“The longer you make them wait down there, the longer they’re out of my hair, so it’s much appreciated. I’m sending you a gift, to show you just how much.”

“Jefe, you send the best gifts, but watching these pendejos squirm is a gift in itself,” Trino said. “And now you’re sending me two more? I should be sending you the gift, Jefe.”

I laughed. Trino was a good guy. He enjoyed his evil side as much as I did.

I had a few minor meetings the rest of the day. Armando had made plans to meet with Dario and Massimo that evening. Viktor organized a security detail to escort him. He would accompany them, but stay out of sight so neither Dario nor Massimo could spot him. It was admittedly difficult for my guys to blend into a crowd.

It was the middle of the afternoon, and I still hadn’t seen Sephie. I was trying not to be worried about her. I didn’t know if she was still asleep. It wasn’t like her to sleep quite this long, unless something was wrong. I called Misha, assuming he was the one waiting on her to wake up. He answered on the first ring. I could hear laughing in the background.

“Where are you?”

“Boss, she’s fine. She’s been awake for a while. Ms. Jackson called her down a little while ago.” He moved so he was out of earshot, since Ms. Jackson could understand Russian. “She’s been trying to leave for the last 20 minutes, but Ms. Jackson and Giana just keep talking to her. Giana has said more today than I’ve ever heard her say. Shopping is the way to that girl’s heart.”

“Tell her I need to see her and you, then. You can always use that xcuse, anytime you see her trying to get away, I will always confirm that.”

He sighed. “Thanks, Boss. We’ll be right there.”

I ended the call, smiling at the thought of Sephie trying to get away from them but not being able to. She might be cranky again…

I didn’t have to wait longer than two minutes and she rushed into my office. I barely had time to stand up before she literally jumped into my arms, wrapping her legs and arms around me tightly. “Oh my God, you saved me. You have no idea how much I love you right now.” She was clinging to me like she’d barely escaped death. Misha walked in, laughing.

“They were making plans to go shopping again,” he said, trying not to laugh.

She leaned back enough that she could look me in the eyes. “They ha te me. They must ha te me. Why else would they want to torture me like that? I mean, Glana I don’t know very well, but Ms, Jackson? I thought she loved me.” She put both of her hands on either side of my face, looking at me very seriously. “I was wrong. I was so wrong.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at her, making her laugh as well. “I can give you’n curfew this time, solnishko.”

She wrapped her arms around my neck again, hugging me Ughtly “See? You clearly love me.”

“I do love you, solnishko. I’m also working on getting Armando his own security detail. Gilana can go shopping as much as she wants, and she’ll be safe once that detail is in place.”

She leaned back to look at me again. I was expecting her to say something funny, but instead she kissed me. Hard. I was caught off guard by her passion, but found myself very turned on by it. Misha cleared his throat, reminding her that he was still in the room. She broke the kiss, pointing at him, but not looking away from me. “Don’t be rude, my adorable Russian guardian.” He laughed as she unwrapped herself from me. She stood on her toes, kissing me one more time and turning to glare at Misha, before laughing. She leaned back against me, which I appreciated as I heeded to adjust my punts otherwise. Her excitement to see me was unexpectedly arousing.

She pulled my arms around her waist, wondering out loud, “so if they get their own security detail soon, does that mean we can go to the house for the weekend?”

1 pulled her close, knowing she felt exactly what she had done to nie, poking her in her back. I rested my chin on the top of her head. “Of course, solnishko. Do you like it better there? I thought you were happy here?”

She squeezed my arms. “Of course, I’m happy here. I’m happy whenever you are. I was actually missing the piano,” she said quietly. She was still somewhat shy about playing in front of us. loved it and I knew the guys did too. She had a real talent for it and we all got to enjoy it when she would play.

I suddenly had an idea on how to surprise her. Can’t believe I hadn’t thought of this before now.

“We can go to the house whenever you like, Sephie. We have enough security to leave with Armando and Giana that they’ll be fine for a couple of days. He’s meeting with Dario and Massimo in couple of hours. I’m sending a detail with him, along with Viktor.”

“Won’t Dario and Massimo recognize Viktor, though? I mean, I know they know that Armando is loyal to you, but that might be a bit too obvious,” she asked. I pulled her toward the couch, keeping my arms around her as I sat down so she would sit in my lap. She kicked her shoes off and crossed her legs in between mine.

Misha laughed. We both looked at him. “Ivan was right. You two are fuc king adorable.”

“It’s because I’m the go ddamn princess and he’s the go ddamn prince. Thank you very much,” she said. She tried to get that out completely before laughing. She almost made it, but started laughing before she could finish it completely. I shook my head at both of them, moving Sephie’s hair off her shoulder, exposing her neck.

“Viktor is very good at staying out of sight, solnishko.”

“Really? There are some Syrian prison officials that might disagree with that statement,” she said.

Misha laughed loudly. Even I laughed at that one. She wasn’t wrong there.

“He’s improved since his time there,” I said, still laughing.

“He’s gonna love that one,” Misha said.

“Did you talk to Trino about Dario and Massimo?” she asked.

“I did. I think you need to meet him at some point. I think he’s a good guy, much like Armando, but I would like to get your opinion on him as well,” I said, my face brushing lightly against her neck. I felt her push her hips backward into me slightly. I knew feeling my facial hair on her neck dr ove her crazy. I was just returning the favor for the way she greeted me earlier.

“Has he given Anthony and Lorenzo an answer yet?” she asked, trying to control herself.

I laughed. “Not yet. He’s really enjoying making them wait. I think he called them puppies? I told him I was sending him a gift. for keeping them out of my hair for a little longer. He said that making them wait was the gift because he was enjoying it so much. And now I’m trying to send two more to him.”

Sephie chuckled. “I like him already.”

We were eventually joined by Ivan, Andrei, and Stephen. Viktor had left already for the meeting with Dario and Massimo. We would wait until he and Armando returned to get the news.

“Bubba, they want to go shopping AGAIN. They want to drag me with them. Help me,” she said as they walked into the office. They all laughed at her blatant hatred for shopping.

“Boss told me I could use him as an excuse to get Sephie away from anything she didn’t want to do from now on. Just tell them he needs to see her,” Misha said, smiling broadly at Sephie.

She leaned her head back, kissing my cheek. “You really do love me.” She smiled sweetly at me. I’m not sure if it was her smiling at me or the fact that she was starting to believe that I really did love her, but I felt my cheeks blush slightly. My entire body suddenly felt warmer, too.

“I really do love you, solnishko.”

“Fu cking adorable,” Ivan and Misha both said in unison, which made everyone laugh. Sephie just hugged my arms to her a little. tighter as she sighed. She always seemed happy anytime she was in my arms, which made me happy. When she wasn’t in my arms, I always felt an invisible pull toward her until I was touching her again. I’d never experienced anything like it before, but I loved it. I was completely addicted to her now and I hoped that feeling never went away

Chapter One Hundred Twenty-Eight

Adrik

Viktor and Armando returned a few hours later. We were still in the office, Sephie still in my lap, talking about anything and everything. Somehow every conversation was more entertaining when she was with us. Not just because of her sense of humor, but because of her genuine interest in all of us, in our pasts, in everything that made us who we are. We were all laughing as Viktor and Armando walked in.

“Looks like I got the short straw today,” Viktor said, smiling.

“It’s your own fault for being so da mn good at your job, my giant Russian security master,” Sephie said, grinning at him.

“How did the meeting go?” I asked Armando.

He sat in one of the chairs across from the couch. “I think it went well. Dario and Massimo were already thinking that Anthony and Lorenzo were trying to meet with Trino, but they weren’t able to get confirmation that they actually had met with him. I think those two are up to something on their own. I don’t think they’re with Sal.” He looked at Sephie, smiling. “I don’t think Massimo blinked once the entire meeting. He must have very dry eyes.”

I felt her shiver once. “That guy creeps me out, not gonna lie.”

Armando chuckled. “He’s always been a bit of an odd bird. Dario too. They always present it as Dario being the one in charge and Massimo is just going along with it, but I think in reality it’s the other way around. There have been stories about Massimo’s savagery for years, but no one ever speaks against him pu blicly and no one knows where he dumps the bodies, 50 they stay rumors.”

“I do.” Sephie said. We all looked at her, shocked. “Yeah, that wasn’t an idle threat. I really do know where he hides the bodies. I also wasn’t kidding about them thinking less of me when I was their personal servant. There were a few meetings when they would stay after everyone else would leave. I’d be cleaning up, trying to get out of there, while they were having their own. meeting. Fu cking mo rons never realized I can understand Italian. They would act like I didn’t exist the entire time I was in the room. I used to stay longer on purpose, just to get more of their conversation. I don’t know why I felt like it was important to have information on Massimo, but I guess I’m glad I did,” she said shrugging her shoulders.

We all just stared at her, in silence. Armando asked her, in Italian, you can really understand Italian?”

She nodded, but answered in English. “I’m just not the best at speaking it, so I don’t. Unless I absolutely have to, which rarely happens. We all just continued to stare at her, completely stunned. “What? Max’s grandmother is Italiam. We spent a lot of time with her. She taught me how to make pasta.”

“Does anyone else, outside this room know you can understand Italian?” Ivan asked. I knew where his mind was going. While this was beneficial to us, it also made her a target of Massimo’s now too.

“Max and his grandmother, but that’s it. It’s obviously not something I make known,” she said.

“I think we need to have a conversation with Max about you,” Ivan said.

“Why?” she asked.

“He needs to keep his mo uth sh ut about you from now on. Not just because of Tori, either,” he said, a look of concern on his face. I felt her tense, but she didn’t say anything. She simply nodded her head.

We discussed a few more things between all of us. Armando looked at his watch. “I should get some dinner for Giana,” he said, running his hand through his dark hair.

“When are you going to ask her out, Mando?” Sephie asked. I could hear her smiling when she asked the question. He looked at her, shocked. “Don’t play du mb. We all see the way you two look at each other.”

He was flustered for a moment. “But… she’s my assistant. I’m her boss.”

“She said the same thing. I feel like that’s just an excuse to keep ignoring your feelings for each other,” Sephie said.

He looked at her, mo uth open, for a few moments. Finally, he realized what she had really just said. “Wait, she feels the same?”

“Well, I can’t answer that definitively, but there’s attraction, as well as interest there. It’s up to you two to figure the rest out. Unless you want to keep ignoring it and pretending it doesn’t exist, which is fine with me, because honestly, it’s entertaining for me.” The guys were trying to hold back their laughter. “She’s a good girl, Armando. I already told her you would let someone else wear all her clothes if she sleeps around. She was mortified at the thought. That’s a good sign,” she said, laughing.

He chuckled, standing up. “Well, then, I should go have a conversation with her, I guess.”

Sephie stood up to give him a hug before he left. As soon as she stepped into his arms, I could see her body tense. She sniffed his shirt, then stepped back from him. “Mando, were there any women at the meeting with Dario and Massimo?” She took another step back from him, like she was trying to get away from him.

He shook his head. “None at the table with us. There was a woman at the bar in the restaurant.”

She looked to Viktor. “Could you see inside the restaurant?”

“No, not at all. I was listening, but I was down the street so no one would see me,” he said.

“Vanessa was there. Or else she’s with either Dario or Massimo. Did you hug either one of them, Mando?”

He shook his head no. “No, I shook their hands, but that’s it.”

“How close were you to the woman at the bar? Do you remember her perfume?” she asked.

“It was very strong, yes. I ordered a drink, but I wasn’t that close to her. As close as you are to me now. She reminded me of the ex-girlfriend that had issues with fidelity. She was not someone wished to speak to,” he said.

I looked to Ivan. “Have you spoken to the tail you put on her today?” He pulled his phone from his pocket and left the room.

“Who’s Vanessa?” Armando asked, puzzled.

I stood up, moving to pull Sephie back to me. I sat down and pulled her back in my lap, hoping to clear her nose of that smell.

“She’s an ex-girlfriend of mine. I broke it off with her years ago, but she showed up recently. It doesn’t make sense. We’re trying to figure out why.” Sephie leaned her head against my shoulder, inhaling deeply like she was trying to replace the perfume smell with my scent.

“You think she’s working for Dario and Massimo?” he asked.

“We don’t think, we know,” Ivan said, walking back into my office. She was at the restaurant and she left-with them. I told the tail to cautiously follow her, so if he ever felt like anyone she was with was trying to evade him, he was to lose them on purpose. He doesn’t know where they went after the restaurant, but she got into the vehicle with them after the meeting.”

I sighed, thinking about how this wels of conspirators just kept gwing.

knew I should’ve punched her in the nose when I had the charice,” Sephte sighed.

Right on time. Everyone laughed

Chapter One Hundred Twenty-Nine

Ivan

Sephie came to me the next morning in the gym. Everyone else was preoccupied with other things, so she snuck over to me, a look of worry on her face.

“I kind of fu cked it up with Massimo and Dario, didn’t I?” she said. I could see the look of genuine concern in her eyes.

I tried not to laugh at her, as I knew she was really worried. “No, princess. We just need to take extra precautions when it comes to you. Salvadori’s people are still actively looking for you and now I’th sure that Massimo’s people will be too. We just need to be more careful. You’re not to leave with any less than three of us, okay?” I put my hand on her shoulder, trying to offer some comfort, but also to make sure that she wasn’t going to argue with me either. She nodded her head, chewing on her bottom lip like she did when she would worry. “I think we also need to have a conversation about exactly what you know about all the other bosses, too. Especially Massimo. There have been a lot of perle after that man for a lot of years. If any one of them find out you know what you know, they could come for you too.”

“Awesome. Let’s just set the whole city onto me. I mean, go big or go home, right?”

I laughed, shaking my head at her. “You know we won’t let anything happen to you, princess. There’s a reason we work for your go ddamn prince and why no one ever gets close to him,” I said, asly smile on my face.

She grinned at me. “I’ve heard stories, yes.” Andrei called for her from across the gym. She smiled at me, turning to go. “My giant trainer beckons me to lift heavy sh it!” she said, as she jogged across the gym.

Her hip must be getting much better if she can handle more than walk.

After we were done in the gym and ready for the day, I caught Boss alone in his office. “I’d like to go have a conversation with Max about keeping his mo uth sh ut about Sephie. And not just because of Tori, either. This new situation with Massimo has me a little worried.”

He looked at me with an intensity that I instantly recognized. He was just as worried about Massimo, but there was something else there. “That kid makes me so angry, but she still feels loyal to him, so I can’t tell you to have as serious of a conversation with him as I’d like to,” he said.

Ah, there it is. This might be the first time I’ve seen him jealous.

I chuckled. “Listen, I’ve wanted to punch that kid since that night in the restaurant when he shook her too hard and then basically abandoned her for some mediocre woman at the bar.”

Adrik’s eyes went wide. “It’s not just me, then? I keep telling her that he’s an id iot. To the point that I’m actually starting to feel bad about it. He’s like her one friend her own age.”

“She’ll see him for how he really is in her own time, Boss. He was the only friend she had after a difficult time in her life. That kind of life experience can make you ignore things you shouldn’t just to keep from being completely alone. I understand her connection to him, but I don’t think it will last that much longer, nless he starts to realize what he’s doing to her every time he chooses another temporary woman over her.”

He looked lost in thought for a moment, but then smiled at me. “Sephie was right. You are wise beyond your years.” He laughed. then added. “She also said you just don’t want anyone to know it because you value your peace too much.”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “She hasn’t been wrong yet, Boss.”

“Let me know how it goes with Max. Do you need anyone to go with you?” he asked, still smiling.

I shook my head no. “Andrei told me that he called them ‘trained killers’ when they saw him yesterday. He’s plenty scared of us and I can be very convincing when needed.”

He nodded his head. “Be as convincing as you need to be without hurting him.”

We’d had Max followed since the night we first met Sephie, just to make sure he stayed safe and that no one would try to get to her through him. We saw him try to hide her behind him in the parking lot that first night when Boss went back to give her money, so we knew there was at the very least a friendship there. Cioing back to give her money was Adrik’s excuse, anyway. He really just wanted to see her again. We all kniew it, but we all played along. We’d never seen him act like that around a woman before, so we were all somewhat fascinated by it.

I knew his schedule, so I knew where to find him. He’d be at the gym, then he’d go home, shower and change in time to get to work just before the happy hour crowd hit. I waited outside the gyn until he came out. I hated smoking, but it was a reasonable excuse to be standing outside, so I smoked a couple of cigarettes while I waited.

All of us had smoked off and on for years, Boss included. We’d all stopped since Sephie came to us, but none of us actively decided to quit. We just did. She never said a word about the habit to any of us. Whatever benefit we were getting from smoking occasionally was no longer worth it.

Max walked out, his head down. Man, this kid is never aware of his surroundings. I followed him to his car, where he finally spotted me in the reflection of his car’s window as he went to open the door.

“Holy shi t, what are you doing there?” he said, turning to face me. He pressed himself against his car, like he was trying to get away from me.

“We need to have a chat, kid,” I said. I put out my cigarette, looking at him seriously the entire time.

“A chat about what?” he asked, even more nervous now.

“Sephie.”

“What’s wrong? Did something happen? Is she okay? I just saw her yesterday.”

“She’s fine. I would like to keep it that way. I’m going to be very clear here, kid. You are no longer going to mention anything about her to anyone. That includes Tori. Especially Tori. No one is to know that your grandmother taught her to understand Italian. No one is to know any details about her from this point forward.” I cracked my knuckles, knowing it would make him even more nervous. “If I hear that she’s in danger because someone found out that bit of information, I’m coming for you first. Are we clear?”

“Ye… yes. We’re clear. Is she in danger?” he asked, his fear overtaken by concern.

I looked at him for a moment. “She’s been in danger since we first met her, but you’ve been too busy choosing other women over her to notice.” I walked away from him before he could respond. He was still leaning against his car, completely stunned, when I glanced back before walking out of sight. Good

Chapter One Hundred Thirty

Non

Two Weeks Later

We hadn't been able to go to the house for a few weeks. Adrik wanted me to take Sephie to the piano gallery so she could play. While we were there, he wanted me to arrange to have a piano sent to the penthouse, hopefully without her knowing.

I grabbed Misha and Andrei to go with us. Boss was disappointed that he couldn't go. Listening to her play was becoming one of his favorite things, so Misha promised to video her so he could watch later. Fu cking adorable.

Sephie wasn't privy to where we were going. We just told her to come with us and that she'd be happy about it.

"I swear on all things holy, I'm punching you all in the nose if you're forcing me to go shopping," she said, trying not to laugh.

We laughed at her in the elevator, on the way to the parking garage. "Princess, I can't believe you would think we would do such a thing to you. It hurts me," I said, putting my hand over my heart. "Which is saying a lot, since I can't feel pain."

"Oh, dear God, you've just come up with the ultimate comeback. The final comeback. Like, how do I top that one? It's the comeback of all comebacks. Conversation-ending comeback. Mic drop. We're done here." She grinned at me.

We pulled up in front of the gallery and her eyes went wide. "This is where you guys are taking me?"

I nodded. "Adrik feels bad we haven't gotten to the house yet. He knows you miss the piano, so he wanted you to have some time. Stay as long as you want, princess."

She got out, with me, while Andrei and Misha parked the vehicles. She turned to me and jumped into my arms, almost catching me off-guard. "Thank you thank you thank you!!"

When we walked in, the salesmen knew her immediately. "Sephie: You're back! We haven't seen you in forever!"

"Hi, Craig. How are you?" she said, hugging him as he walked up.

"I'm good, Sephie. Please tell me you're here to get some playing time in. We have a couple of potential customers coming in just about 15 minutes and you're going to sell pianos today for us if you play," he smiled widely at her. Andrei and Misha walked in, standing next to me. Craig looked nervously at us, but tried to remain calm.

"I am here to play, if you don't mind," she said. Without even looking at us, she added, "and don't mind the giant men. They're with me. I'm experimenting with having my own audience now."

Craig cocked his head to the side, not sure if she was serious or not, but he laughed. "Pick any piano you like, even though I have a feeling I know which one you're going for."

She shrugged her shoulders. "I like what I like, Craig." She walked toward one of the pianos toward the back of the showroom. Misha and Andrei followed, while I lagged behind to speak to Craig, who looked slightly terrified that I wanted to speak to him.

"We'd like to arrange for her own piano, but it needs to be delivered to a penthouse. Is that possible?" I asked. "And I'm assuming you know which one she will like best?"

•

He looked at me, smiling, tears welling up in his eyes. I looked at him, puzzled. "I've been waiting for this moment since her mother passed. Her mother was a dear friend of mine, Sephie had to sell her piano to pay for funeral expenses, I've kept it safe in the back of the store, without her knowing, In the hopes that this day would come. The piano she always plays in the showroom is the exact model that her mother had. That's why she always chooses it. She's trying to get as close to her mo m's piano as possible."

I felt a pang in my chest as he talked. This is beyond fu cking adorable. "Can we get it moved to the penthouse? Money is no object. Whatever needs to happen to get it there, we'll do it."

"As long as your elevator is freight-sized, we should be fine. We move pianos to high-rise apartments all the time. If we have to use the stairs, we have to use the stairs." He thought for a moment, then added, "once we used a crane. I've never been so nervous in my life."

I nodded my head. I handed him my card, "I'll be the contact for the arrangements. Please, try to keep this between us. We'd like for it to be a surprise."

Before he took my card, he looked at me like he was gathering every ounce of courage to stand up to me, "I will only agree to this if I'm allowed to be there when she sees the piano. Her mother was incredibly dear to me and I made a promise to her that I intend to keep."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," I said, sliding my card into his shirt pocket as I patted his shoulder. I walked to the back of the showroom to Andrei and Misha.

Andrei raised his eyebrows at me, silently asking if arrangements had been made. I leaned closer to his ear, telling him. everything I'd just learned. When I finished and looked at him, he had tears welling up in his eyes too.

"She's going to be so happy," he said. I nodded, completely understanding what he was feeling in that moment.

Sephie was happily playing when a few people wandered into the store. There were a few other salesmen, other than Craig, that spoke to them. The customers couldn't stop themselves from walking closer to Sephie as she played. They were mesmerized. Craig eventually walked up beside us, a small crowd had now formed around her. She seemed oblivious to it, as she just kept playing. Craig smiled. "This always happens when she comes in. I differed to pay her for doing this on a regular basis, but she wouldn't take it. The pianos sell themselves when she's here."

Sephie played for a few hours, before finally deciding she'd had her fill. They sold three pianos while she played, so they were sorry to see her go. Misha got plenty of video for Adrik for later. He sent a few of the shorter ones to him already. Fu cking adorable.

Misha and Andrei pulled the vehicles around to the front of the building. Misha jumping out of the second one, getting in with Andrei. I got into the driver's seat, Sephie was in the passenger seat with me.

We made our way back toward the penthouse, through afternoon traffic. Andrei dr ove through an intersection and the next thing I knew, I heard metal crunching on my left side and we were going sideways, I looked to Sephie, turning toward her to try and shield her from the impact. Everything was in slow motion. I couldn't be sure, but it looked like there were wings surrounding her as bits of shattered glass flew through the air around her. She looked at me, clearly worried, but all I could see was the feathers. Were they…changing?

Chapter One Hundred Thirty-One

Sephie

We were following Andrei and Misha back to the penthouse when suddenly we were hit from the side. The truck that hit us was large, like a delivery truck, so it forced us sideways into parked cars on the side of the street. I looked to Ivan. He was bleeding from his head and was unconscious. Sh it.

The truck that hit us backed up, and moved so that it was blocking most of the street. That's not normal. This was no accident. I reached over, trying to shake Ivan awake. I remembered Misha and Andrei making it through the intersection before us. Surely, they saw us get hit. They'd be here any second.

Gunfire. Double sh it.

"Ivan! Ivan, I really need you to wake up right about now." I tried shaking him, but he was non-responsive. How hard do you need to get hit to knock you out if you don't feel pain?

I tried to unbuckle my seatbelt, but it was stuck. I couldn't get it to release. I stretched over to Ivan, who always had a knife on him, usually more than one, and grabbed it from the holster on his leg. I made a me ntal note that I could also reach his gun.

I cut myself out of the seatbelt, moving closer to Ivan so I could assess the damage. He had hit his head hard. He also had a pretty nasty wound on his shoulder and his upper left arm, probably from the glass breaking. The gunfire was continuous at this point and now I could hear shouting coming closer to the vehicle.

I watched as one man provided cover for a second to run toward us. It was definitely not Andrei and it was definitely not Misha. I heard the first guy yell in Italian, "make sure you get the girl alive,"

News flash, boys. You're going to have to work much harder than you thought to get this girl alive.

I waited until the second man got closer to the vehicle. I had taken Ivan's gun out of the holster, safety off, waiting. He ran up to the driver's side window, trying to see if the door was open. Our vehicle was smashed against a parked car, so there was no getting out that way. He got frustrated when the door wouldn't open. He moved so that he was clear of Ivan, and I took the shot. He fell to the ground without realizing what hit him.

As it turns out, having a gun fired right next to your head will, in fact, bring you back to reality. Ivan jolted awake, looking at me wide-eyed,

"Ivan, they're coming for us. We have to get out of here. I haven't seen Misha or Andrei, but there's been gunfire for a few minutes now. Hold this," I said, handing him the gun. I cut him out of his seatbelt. "Can you feel your legs? How badly are you hurt? Please tell me you'll be able to walk, because there's no chance I'm gonna be able to carry you."

He thought for a moment, still trying to get his bearings. "I'm okay, princess. I can walk. The glove box. Open it."

I did as he said, finding another gun, along with a small round disk. "What's this?" I asked.

"Press on it. They'll get a signal and know where we are. Put it in your pocket. They'll be able to find you as long as you keep that on you, Sephie, look at me." I pressed the disc, putting it in my pocket, then looked at him. "We're getting out of here. No matter what it takes."

"Um, I ha te to break it to you, but my body count is already higher than yours today, sooooo…." I couldn't help but grin at his stunned expression. I just pointed to the window. "Outside your door."

He leaned over enough to see the body of the guy I shot. He looked back at me, a small smile on his face. "Beast mode activated."

"He tried to open your door. They're trying to get me. I heard them yelling," I said.

He nodded. "We should be able to get out the back. Are you okay? You can run?" I nodded my head. He climbed to the back, still talking. "Ever stolen a car before?"

"Negatory, good buddy."

"Today is your lucky day, princess. We're getting you out of here and marking that off your bucket list." He unlatched the back door, but held it so it wouldn't raise all the way. He checked the surroundings, making sure there was no one visible, before jumping quickly to the ground. Still holding the door, he checked again and then nodded for me to jump down.

As soon as we were out of the vehicle, he closed the back door. One hand on me, the other on his gun, he kept us both as low as possible to avoid attention. The gunfire was still steady behind us as we quickly ran down the street, using each parked car as cover.

"What kind of car are we looking to steal today, Squishy? I mean, do I get to pick?" We ran to the next car, ducking behind it and waiting. As we ran to the next car, he saw a bike parked two more car lengths away.

"As it turns out, we aren't stealing a car today. We're stealing that," he pointed to the bike. "Easier to hotwire. Faster too."

"I like these options. I approve these options." I noticed him breathing heavier before we made a run for the next car. "Ivan, look at me. You might not be feeling pain, but you're hurt. You have to tell me what else is going on in your body. You've already lost a lot of blood."

"I'm okay. I've been here before. We need to get out of here quickly, though," he said, making a run for the next car. The bike was in front of us. He pointed back in the direction we just came from. "Point your gun in that direction and if you see anyone coming this way, sh oot."

"Got it," I said, turning to watch the street while he hotwired the bike. In seemingly under a minute, I heard the bike's engine turnover. He climbed on the bike, whistling once. I ran to jump on the bike behind him. We sped away down the street.

Chapter One Hundred Thirty-Two

Sephie

Because we were still close to downtown, there was still traffic that we had to weave in and out of. I wasn't sure how he was managing to stay conscious, but he was navigating through traffic like it was easy. We made it to the freeway and he accelerated up the entrance ramp.

I had a moment of relief, thinking we were safe now. Boy, was I wrong. We hadn't been on the freeway for two minutes when three bikes appeared behind us. They got closer, one of them attempting to push us over. As he got closer to us, I reached out and tried to kick him. He faltered but didn't crash. He came back for more, still trying to push us over. I waited until he was close enough that I could almost touch him and shot through his heart. Push us over now, bitch. I looked back at the other two bikes. They fell back, but were still following us.

"Ivan, they're still behind us. I can shoot them, but there's too many cars. I'm not going to be responsible for shooting an innocent person today."

He nodded his head once, accelerating. "Hold on."

I gripped him tighter as we sped away from the group of cars. His shirt was wet with his blood. Shit. The road was mostly clear ahead of us. The two bikes following us also sped up, keeping the same distance. We pulled farther away from the cars. I looked back, trying to aim at one of them, but didn't feel like I had a clear shot. I couldn't see well enough looking backward to feel like I could actually hit one of them.

"Ivan, I can't get a clear shot. I'm gonna kill someone else," I said, starting to panic.

"Do you trust me, princess?"

"Of course. I trust you with my life. I know what you're fighting right now to get me out of here."

"Hold on and when I say, you shoot left, I'll shoot right. Got it?"

"Got it."

"Use the gas tank to brace against. I'm not sure I can hold us both." I put my hand that was holding onto him on the gas tank. I felt him brake hard, pushing against the gas tank with all my strength to keep myself off him. As we slowed even more, he spun the bike around, facing the opposite direction. We were now facing the bikes that had been following us.

"Now!" I aimed at the rider on the left as he aimed right. We shot at the same time, watching as both riders fell to the ground, their bikes and their bodies sliding across the lanes of the freeway.

"I'm gonna have to give Stephen a high-five later for teaching you how to shoot, princess."

"Me too, Squishy. Me too."

He spun the bike back around and took off quickly. He was flying down the freeway. I checked behind us frequently, but there was not a single car behind us. I'm sure we stopped traffic completely, which was advantageous.

Weissed the exit for the penthouse, but Ivan kept going. I knew he was on his way to the house. He'd been quiet. 1 worried about his losing consciousness again

ling in your body right now?"

"My heart is racing. Keep talking to me, please. It helps keep me focused. We're almost there."

I started rambling about anything I could think of, to keep him focused and more importantly, conscious. We made it to the exit for the house and I felt slight relief.

I was running out of things to talk about, and I blurted out, "do you think Adrik wants kids? Because that's not possible with me. That's why I hate doctors. A doctor took that choice from me."

He was starting to nod, so I wasn't even sure he heard me. We pulled into the driveway. Just a little farther, Squishy. He made it to the front of the house. I jumped off the bike and helped him off. I threw his arm around my shoulders, to help him walk up the steps. As we reached the landing after the top step, he stopped. He looked at me, with a serious look in his eye. "He loves you no matter what, Sephie. We all love you no matter what."

I don't know if it was this giant man, clearly battered, clearly struggling to remain conscious, stopping to reassure me or if it was him admitting that he loved me or if it was my adrenaline wearing off, but I felt hot tears just fall freely down my cheeks.

"Don't cry, princess." He pulled me to him, hugging me briefly. I felt him falter and then he slowly lost his grip on consciousness.

"Ivan, no. Not yet. Shit." I said as I tried to keep him from crashing to the ground. I managed to get behind him, wrapping my arms around his waist. I used every ounce of strength I had left to help him to the ground as gently as I could manage. It meant that he was basically laying on top of me, but at least he didn't hit his head again on the way down.

"This looks like a good place, Ivan. I agree. I feel like we should wait here."

I checked his wounds, since there was really not much else I could do. The cut on his head was pretty good, but the one on his arm was concerning. "I'm not completely convinced honey is going to take care of that one, Squishy." It was still bleeding profusely. Jesus, how much blood has he already lost from that? He's like a superhuman if he stayed conscious this long. Super Squishy.

I tried to push him off me enough that I could get to my belt. I ended up laughing. He didn't move in the slightest. I looked down. "Okay, so I'm just gonna borrow your belt for this. It's not awkward in the least." I reached down to unbuckle it, singing to myself, "not date rapey vibes here, not at all."

I managed to pull his belt off and get it around his shoulder. I pulled it as tight as I could, trying to stem the bleeding. In the process of all that, his head had fallen over to the side. "That looks really uncomfortable Super Squishy. Let me help you with that." I moved his head so he was leaning back on my shoulder. "Don't worry. They're going to be here any minute."

I was quiet for a few minutes, trying to think of what to do. I didn't have a phone. I had that disc thing from the glove box in my pocket, but that was it. I couldn't get my legs out from under Ivan's almost 300 lbs of pure muscle dead weight, so I was stuck here until someone else got here.

He started to twitch, mumbling quietly. I felt his body tense. I felt a pain in my chest, as I knew what he was going through. The darkness.

"Super Squishy, I'm still here. I won't leave you, I promise. I'm right here, buddy. Just walk toward my voice."

His body stilled, his breathing calmed down. I exhaled, starting to worry that they wouldn't make it to me in time. He had lost a lot of blood. There was a puddle underneath us. I had slowed it with his belt, but not stopped it.

He started to jerk again, slightly,

Ivan, I'm here. I'm always here. I'm always going to be here. I just kept repeating that to him untill I finally heard a v

coming up the drive. I was half afraid to look to see who it was. I was mostly sure it would've been one of the guys, but it didn't sound like their vehicles, so I couldn't be sure. I took Ivan's gun from the waistband of his pants, safety off, and held it against him so they wouldn't see until it was too late. My back was to the driveway, so they would've seen me grab the gun I had, as I had put it in the small of my back in the waistband of my pants.

I heard the vehicle stop and the door open. "Okay, Ivan, this is either going to be really good or really, really bad. Wish me luck. I might be quiet for a minute, but I'm still here. Don't go anywhere, buddy."

Chapter One Hundred Thirty-Three

Sephie

I heard footsteps, then the voice I was dying to hear. "Sephie! Are you hurt?"

"Turns out it was really good, buddy. The day just took a turn for the better," I whispered in his ear, squeezing him just a little tighter.

Adrik's arms were around me in seconds. I took a deep breath, finally safe.

"Ivan's really hurt. He sacrificed himself to get me here. Don't tell him I said this, but I think he needs to go to the hospital. He's lost a ton of blood. I can't lift him by myself. And I don't know what happened to Andrei and Misha. They got separated from us. There was gunfire but that's all I know."

I felt Adrik's lips on my temple. "They're fine. Andrei was shot, but non-lethal. Viktor is right behind me." Just as he said that, I heard the normal sound of the SUV pulling up the driveway. "We'll get Ivan to the hospital. Andrei is already on the way there. Misha is okay. Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm okay. Ivan took the worst of it. And by that, I mean he took all of it." I had a flash of when the truck hit us. I could clearly see Ivan turn his body toward me, using his body as a shield from the impact. He looked me in the eye as we came to rest against the parked car. I clearly remember the look on his face. It was like he was seeing something else. At first, he was confused, then he was in awe. "He used his body to shield me, Adrik. He sacrificed himself."

I wasn't even aware of the tears falling down my face until Adrik reached down and wiped them away. Viktor ran up the steps and helped Adrik lift Ivan off me. They carried him to the SUV. I got up quickly and climbed into the back with him, leaning him in my lap again. Adrik climbed in the front with Viktor, and we sped away from the house.

I talked quietly to Ivan the whole way to the hospital. I felt like I needed to warn him that we were taking him there. I didn't think this was going to go well, but we didn't have a choice.

We were met by Misha and Stephen when we pulled up to the hospital. "Where's Bubba?" I asked as Misha opened the door to grab Ivan. He looked at me, a small smile on his face, "surgery, gazelle. He's okay. They're just getting the bullet out."

They were met by nurses with a bed for Ivan just outside the doors to the emergency room. They loaded him onto the bed. I tried to go with him, but they wouldn't let me into the room. I felt Adrik's arms around me from behind, his face against mine. "We should get you checked out to make sure you're okay too. You said you're fine, but you have cuts of your own. Your head is bleeding, solnishko."

"It is? Are you sure it's my blood? Ivan was bleeding profusely." He gently turned me so that I was facing him. A small smile on his face. He pushed a few curls out of my face.

"I'm sure it's yours, solnishko. Will you let them look at you? Ivan and Andrei are in good hands. They're tough. They're going to be fine. I need to make sure you're also fine. They already checked out Misha." He pressed his lips gently to mine. He was so calm right now that it made me calm. I inhaled, closing my eyes. He pulled me closer to him, walking us toward another room where a nurse was waiting to check me over. She also had a pair of scrubs for me to change Into. My clothes were covered in Ivan's blood. And maybe a little of mine. I did have a few cuts that I hadn't even noticed. I got more stitches because I hadn't had enough stitches at this point in my life. I had a deep cut on my hairline and one on my arm that both required stitching up. Otherwise, my other cuts were mostly from broken glass and would heal on their own.

We waited in the hallway for them to give us word on Andrei and Ivan. While we waited, they asked questions about what had happened, so I recapped what I could remember. I got to the part about shooting the guy in the face and stopped, not wanting to say it out loud as there wore people walking up and down the hallway. I knew the word for "shoot" in Russian, so I said that and pointed to my face. Their eyes went wide. Adrik pulled me against him as I continued to tell them about Ivan waking up getting out of the vehicle and to the bike. Then about the chase on the freeway with the other three bikes, the first one that had shot, and what Ivan had done to give us a clear shot for the last two. Once I told them about me going left, him going ri I walked to Stephen. I high fived him once. "That's from me for teaching me how to shoot. Ivan said he owes you one, as wel Stephen laughed quietly.

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"We saw you guys get hit. Andrei stopped immediately, but there were guys waiting. They knew we had two vehicles and were trying to separate us. We got out to try to get to you guys, but they started firing immediately. We both took cover, slowly making our way toward you, but it wasn't fast enough. We saw the guy you hit run toward you. Andrei made a run after him. and that's when he got hit. They just hit his shoulder, but he was forced to take cover behind a parked car. Viktor and Stepher showed up soon after. They said they got the signal from your beacon, but you guys were already well on your way to the freeway by the time they got to us. They knew Ivan would take you to the house, which is when Adrik left the penthouse for t house."

I remembered that he had showed up alone to the house. "That reminds me, how did you get to the house again?" I asked, looking at Adrik.

He smirked. "I know how to drive. I just choose not to most of the time." He laughed at the face I made. "I have a sports car, solnishko. I rarely take it out anymore, but it came in handy today." He wrapped his arms around me tighter, kissing my temple. I was happy for his warm body next to mine. The scrubs I was wearing were not-the warmest clothing choice for a cold hospital

"And did you four just kill everyone or did you leave unfinished business?" I asked Viktor, one eyebrow raised.

He laughed his deep belly laugh. "No unfinished business, sestrichka. Misha and Stephen got Andrei to the hospital, and I left for the house."

"Good game, everyone. Seriously. I feel like teamwork really made the motherfucking dream work this time," I said, as they all laughed at me.

Chapter One Hundred Thirty-Three

Sephie

I heard footsteps, then the voice I was dying to hear. “Sephie! Are you hurt?”

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for the house.”

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Chapter One Hundred Thirty-Four

Sephie

A nurse finally came down the hallway toward us. We all looked at her expectantly. “The gunshot wound is out of surgery. He’s still coming out from under anesthesia, but you’ll be able to see him soon. The vehicle accident victim…” she paused, and I felt my heart drop. She cleared her throat. “He’s proving to be a difficult patient. We’ve given him three times the normal anesthesia and he keeps waking up and trying to leave the table. He’s got a terrible fracture in his arm that we’re trying to fix, along with repairing the soft tissue, but it’s proving to be next to impossible.”

“You have to let me in there. I can keep him calm.” I said, as urgently as I could.

She looked at me like I was crazy, but I think the look on my face told her that I was serious. “I don’t know what else we can try without killing him, so come on.” I followed her quickly to the surgery room. She hurriedly put a sterile gown over my scrubs. I walked in the room ahead of her. Everyone in the room was surprised and protested. I stopped, looking at all of them, showing my anger on full display. “If you don’t let me near him, he will wake up and kill you all. I can keep him calm so you can fix him. Your choice as to which option you want.”

They stepped back. I ran to Ivan’s side. They had tried to tie him to the bed, he was struggling, half-awake, half-asleep, but fighting with everything he had left. As soon as I put my hands on his chest, he stopped struggling. I leaned down to whisper in his ear. “Hi, Super Squishy. These fucking morons wouldn’t let me come in with you, but they’ve learned their lesson. I’m not leaving you again. Promise. They need to work on your arm. It’s broken. You’ve lost a lot of blood. I’m going to be here the whole time. I won’t leave you.” His body relaxed and he leaned his head back. As he inhaled deeply, I looked at the doctors and nurses and nodded my head.

“You can do what you need to do. He won’t resist.”

They stood frozen for a moment, completely shocked at what they just witnessed. The nurse that had allowed me in there. snapped out of it first and brought me a chair to sit in, so I could stay by his head without being in the way. I nodded in appreciation as I sat down, never taking my hand off him.

The doctor got back to work on his arm. Ivan stayed still, his breathing steady. I kept my hand on his chest, my thumb rubbing back and forth gently. He raised his good arm, putting his hand on top of mine and everyone jumped back from the table. “He’s waking up again!”

I felt him squeeze my hand slightly. I looked at the doctor. “He’s been awake since I got in here. Your drugs don’t work on him. Get back to work before his patience runs out.” He squeezed one more time.

It took them over an hour longer to fix his arm. The break was the easiest thing to fix. It was all the soft tissue damage that took the longest to repair. He cut a lot of veins, as well as his brachial artery, which is why he bled so much. They finally got everything repaired and all the bleeding stopped. Once they were done stitching him up, the nice nurse looked at me. “He can go to a recovery room now. You can go back out and wait for him to be transferred to the room with the gunshot victim.”

“You must be crazy to think I’m leaving him again. Do you hate your coworkers? Do you want them all to die tonight, because that’s what’s gonna happen If you don’t keep me with him.”

She looked shocked but didn’t argue. “Come on, then. We’re going to the recovery room.”

He squeezed my hand harder this time. The mass amounts of drugs they gave him wearing off. I bent down closer to his ear, “told you I wasn’t going to leave you again. These people are nuts anyway.” He took one short breath, in between a cough and a laugh. I flipped my hand over and laced my fingers through his, so I could squeeze his hand.

I won’t leave you to the darkness, Ivan.

Ivan was in and out of the recovery room in record time. He had all the nurses completely baffled at how he reacted to anesthesia. They were talking loud enough that I knew he could hear them. He still had an oxygen mask over his mouth and nose, so he couldn’t talk, but his eyes were open. I knew he was completely awake and aware now. I leaned closer to him, so they couldn’t hear me. “They’ve never seen a superhuman before, Super Squishy. You’re the first one. They’ll have your babies, if you want. I’ll get their numbers. You can decide later.”

This time he actually laughed. Both nurses came back to check on him. He looked at me, his eyes smiling. He hadn’t let go of my hand and I wasn’t about to let go of his. I looked at the nurses. “Does he still need the mask? He’s completely awake now. He has been since we got in here, if I’m being honest.”

“How is that even possible? He had like three times the normal amount of anesthesia,” one of the nurses asked me, completely shocked.

“I mean, some people are just superhumans. You should see him leap tall buildings in a single bound,” I said, trying not to laugh. He couldn’t hold it in and started laughing again.

“Okay, we can switch out the mask. He’s definitely awake,” she said, taking the mask off his face and replacing it with the tube that just went under his nose.

“Yeah! Now you can feel like the oxygen is trying to pick your nose. That’s so much better!”

He spoke to me in Russian, so the nurses wouldn’t understand. “Thank you. For staying with me. You’re what pulled me through that.”

I smiled at him, answering him in Russian, “I’m not leaving you until they let you out of here. For their safety.” I winked at him. The nurses were looking at us curiously, but remained silent. “We’re going to move him to the room with the other guy that came in ahead of him.” I nodded, standing up. I suddenly felt very tired. I looked down at Ivan, knowing he wasn’t feeling anything, and said, “stop hogging the bed, asshole. I want to ride along to the room.”

He sat up and moved over for me sit beside him on the bed before laying back down. Both nurses just stood there, mouths. hanging open. “That’s incredible,” one of them said.

I acted like I was discreetly pointing at him, but made it overly obvious. “Superhuman. He also has x-ray vision, in case you were wondering what we were talking about earlier.” I couldn’t help but laugh at their shocked faces. “I’m just fucking with you. Inappropriate humor is how I deal with trauma. It’s been a long day.” Another nurse showed up to wheel us to the room where Andrel was, and I assumed everyone else was too.

Once we left the recovery room, Ivan pulled me over toward his face. “You’re a little bit evil, princess,” he said, quietly.

I laughed. “Maybe just a little, but it’s so fun. Save me from myself I begged. He quietly wrapped his giant arm-around my shoulders as they wheeled us down the hallway

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 135

Chapter One Hundred Thirty-Five

Sephie

We were still laughing when we were wheeled into the room with Andrei. Everyone turned to look at us. Misha's wide smile across this face. "Ivan, you're the only one I know that would be laughing after coming out of that long of a surgery."

He sat up farther and the nurse adjusted the bed to support him. "It's not me. It's her. She's evil in the best way possible."

Adrik looked at me sternly, his hands on his hips. "Persephone, what have you done now." He cracked a smile, opening his arms for me. I hopped off the bed and went to him, laughing.

"I did nothing except save their lives. They should be thanking me.

Ivan laughed. "She's not kidding there. I traumatized that one doctor, I'm sure of it. But then she showed up and started cracking jokes. Those two nurses in the recovery room didn't know what to think."

"It's a gift," I said, shrugging my shoulders. I walked to Andrei, who didn't look too bad considering he was shot earlier. I leaned down and kissed his cheek. "How you doin', Bubba?"

"I've had worse. This wasn't so bad. They just had to dig the bullet out," he said.

I made a motion like I was going to vomit. "It sounds so pleasant when you say it like that."

He chuckled. "Don't puke on the guy that got shot trying to run to save you." He laughed, then added, "although it turns out I didn't need to. You took care of it like a boss, spider monkey."

"I took care of it like the goddamn princess," I said, laughing.

Everyone laughed and for a moment, we had all forgotten what had happened that day. I knew it was going to hit us all later, but for now, we were alive, we were together, and I was grateful for each one of them.

The doctor came in later to check on the patients. He told them both he saw no reason why they couldn't go home the next morning. He wanted to monitor both of them through the night, but as long as everything went well overnight, then they could go home in the morning. He asked to speak to me in the hallway once he was satisfied with both Ivan and Andrei.

Adrik looked concerned and got up to come with me, but I motioned for him to stay, I said, "I'll be okay," quietly as I followed the doctor into the hallway.

"Young lady, I don't know what kind of special powers you have over that man, but it's unlike anything I've ever seen. I've never had a patient that resistant to heavy sedatives before. We gave him enough to sedate a horse and it barely touched him. But you walked in, whispered something to him and he

as perfectly still. I don't understand it, but I'm in awe of it. I was just about to call It and let him bleed to death on the table when you walked in. I wasn't going to let him kill one of my nurses or me."

"Oh, he would've killed all of you," I said, sincerely.

I believe you." He offered me his hand. "Thank you. For helping me save his life today and for saving mine and those of my hand

at him. "He's not a monster, but doctors are the reason he is like he is, so he's not exactly a fais of

e had an experience with a doctor that he can store in the good column for once,

He looked surprised at my words, the gravity of the situation fully hitting him. Without thinking, I hugged him. He needed it.

"What's your name?" I asked him, as I stepped back from him.

"Charlie. Charlie Williams."

"If we're ever in this situation again, and there's a solid chance we will be, Dr. Williams, can I have them call you in to take care of him? It'll help him to know who's working on him."

He smiled nervously at me. "As long as you're there, of course."

"As long as I'm alive, I will always be there for him. He's the reason I'm standing here right now." I smiled sweetly at him, trying to hold it together until we finished this little chat.

"Deal," he said.

"Thank you, Doctor." I said, still smiling through the pain I knew was about to come gushing out.

"No, thank you," he said as he turned to leave. I checked the hallway. It was empty, the floor was mostly quiet. I exhaled loudly, putting my hands on my hips as I walked across the hall and leaned against the wall. I just needed a minute before going back in. I put my hands over my eyes, my head leaned back against the wall. The tears started to come. I couldn't stop them.

I felt warm hands around my waist, pulling me to him. He didn't say anything, he just held me close as his hands ran up and down my back. I was fighting to get control as I lost the battle and sobbed against his chest.

"It's okay, solnishko. Let it out." I cried for a few minutes, but finally regained control enough that I could look at him. "Was it the doctor? What happened?" he asked, concern on his face.

1 shook my head no. "No, the doctor thanked me for saving his life today. They had Ivan strapped to the bed and he was still managing to get up to go after them," I sucked in a breath as I thought of the sight of Ivan strapped to the bed. I could only imagine how many times in his life he'd been strapped to a medical bed. "As soon as I touched him and talked to him, he didn't move anymore." I smiled, remembering how they all jumped away. "Well, not exactly. He grabbed my hand and they all jumped away from the table at once." I laughed, feeling more tears coming. I looked up at Adrik, tears streaming down my face. "He almost died today. Because of me. Andrei got shot today. Because of me."

He looked at me, a flood of emotions coming over his face at once. He pulled me to him, resting his chin on top of my head. "No, Sephie. Not because of you. You did nothing, you hear me? None of this is your fault." He put his hands on my shoulders, pushing me back enough that he could look me in the eyes again. "None of this is your fault."

"I opened my big mouth and told Massimo I know where he hides the bodies. I'm sure it was his men that came after us today. I heard them yelling. They wanted me alive."

He pulled me back to him, sighing. "It doesn't matter who it was that came after you today. They're going to pay. I'm tired of being nice. They're all going to fear me after today." He was running his hands up and down my back the way he did when he was trying to keep himself calm. I wrapped my arms around his waist, holding onto him tightly. Part of me didn't want what 1 knew was about to happen. The other part of me, wanted to unleash Hell. At that moment, I wasn't sure which part would win

Chapter One Hundred Thirty-Six

Sephie

Well after dark, one of the nurses came in and informed us that visiting hours were ending soon and that we would need to leave. I couldn't help it. I laughed. "I think you should call Dr. Williams and ask him if it's a good idea for me to leave." She looked at me like I was a petulant child. I mean, I partially couldn't blame her. I was too tired to have any sort of tact at that moment. She tried to cop an attitude with me. Everyone but Andrei and Ivan stood up. I took a step toward her, crossing my arms across my chest. "Call Dr. Williams."

She left the room in a huff and I returned to the side of Ivan's bed. I felt slightly guilty about torturing him with having to share a bed, but I knew he didn't feel anything. He didn't seem to mind.

The nurse came back a few minutes later, her attitude visibly different. She was now overly nice and clearly frightened. She asked us if we'd be needing an extra bed. I put on my best fake smile as I nodded my head yes. She left as quickly as she could. The guys all laughed when she left the room.

"You don't even need us anymore, gazelle. She's more scared of you than she is us," Misha said, yawning in his chair.

"She doesn't know I'm the go ddamn princess." I mumbled, crossing my arms again across my chest.

A different nurse came in later with an extra bed. I looked at Misha and nodded my head toward the bed for him to lie down.

"You're clearly tired. You can have the first shift. We'll be quiet." He looked at everyone else, who all agreed. Viktor, Stephen, and Adrik were fairing better than the rest of us. I was happy making Ivan share, for now. Misha got up and stretched out on the small bed, his legs dangling off the end of the bed.

I laughed. "This is going to be the best night's sleep you've ever had, my giant adorable Russian guardian."

We were quiet so Misha could sleep. Andrei fell asleep quickly as well. I looked over to find Viktor and Stephen with their eyes/ closed, their heads leaned back against the wall. Adrik was still concerned about me, and would check on me every so often, but would close his eyes in between. Ivan was awake next to me.

I looked over at him, whispering, "you should sleep, Squishy. I won't leave. I promise." He looked at me, the fear in his eyes clearly visible.

"Promise?" he asked. He sounded more vulnerable in that moment than I would have ever imagined he could be.

"Pinky swear, even," I said, holding my pinky up. He looked at me, puzzled. "Right. Let me introduce you to the pinky swear. It's the holiest of swears there is. Like completely trumps swearing on all things holy, on your mother's grave, on your life, all of it. It's the holiest of holy swears. Like the pope himself can't even make a pinky swear because he's not holy enough.

He chuckled and held his pinky up. I grabbed his pinky with mine. "I plnky swear I will not leave you."

"Thank you," he said, a look of relief on his face. He leaned his head back, closing his eyes. I looked over to Adrik, catching him watching our exchange…

I smiled at him, trying to let him know I was okay. He just mouthed "I love you" and closed his eyes again. I leaned my head onto Ivan's shoulder and closed my eyes.

Nobody got much sleep during the night, but it was better than nothing. The nurses would have to come in every few hours to check on Andrel and Ivan. Whoever was on the extra bed would get up and let someone else have a chance to be down.

Chapter One Hundred Thirty-Six

Ivan eventually fell asleep, but had troubled dreams throughout the night. He would fall asleep for a bit and I would relax and start to drift off to sleep, only to feel his body start to je rk. I would just lean close to his ear, whispering to him to let him know I was still there, and he would calm down. I tried to be as quiet as I could, but Viktor caught me calming him down.

Viktor looked at me, with a knowing look. "You're the only one that's ever been able to do that. This isn't the first time we've been in the hospital with him. It's never gone this well. Being here brings up whatever is in his past and every time before, he's struggled for days with it. They can't sedate him either. We've had to hold him down before to keep him from hurting anybody."

I sighed. "He has reason to be this way. He told me what happened to him. We should all be seriously impressed that he didn't turn into a real monster."

Viktor looked surprised. "He told you? Everything?" I nodded my head. "He's never told anyone." He thought for a second, before smiling. "I shouldn't be surprised."

I smiled at him, looking from him to Ivan sleeping soundly. I sighed again, "everyone has demons. My demons recognize a few of his and his demons recognize a few of mine. He felt comfortable enough to tell me, I guess."

The doctor was back early the next morning to check on them both. I think he wanted to release them as soon as possible just to get them out of the hospital more than anything, but I wasn't going to complain. I didn't want to be there any longer than absolutely necessary. They both got the green light to leave. Both were instructed to take it easy for a few days. Both had their arms in slings. I'm sure it helped Andrei's arm feel slightly less painful, but for Ivan, it kept him from overusing his arm and ripping the stitches out. He'd already tried to use it once because he forgot he wasn't supposed to. It didn't seem to matter that he was heavily bandaged. He still "forgot" that arm was currently under construction and not usable.

Viktor and Stephen pulled the vehicles to the door. The nurses showed up with two wheelchairs for Andrei and Ivan. I couldn't help myself again. I laughed at them. "You guys wasted a trip," I said, as both guys stood up behind me and walked out of the room. Yep, they were a different breed.

Ivan got in the passenger seat, while I climbed in the back, moving over so Adrik could slide in beside me. His arms were immediately around me, pulling me closer to him. He whispered in my ear, "I appreciate why you did it, but I don't ever want to be apart from you for that long again." He kissed my temple. I felt my cheeks blush.

We dr ove to the house, to give Andrei and Ivan a few quiet days. I was happy to be going to the house as well. After I took a nap, I was looking forward to a long walk. My hip was finally feeling almost back to normal, with only slight soreness now and then if I overdid it.

I leaned against Adrik, closing my eyes. Happy to be next to him. Happy that Ivan and Andrei were okay. Happy that we were all together still. Knowing that the storm was coming.

The guys all dispersed to their rooms, but not before I made sure that Andrei and Ivan would be okay on their own. Ivan slid his arm around my shoulders, saying quietly, "I know you barely slept last night because you were busy keeping me calm. You need to sleep for at least a few hours, princess. I'll be fine." I looked at him skeptically. He just held up his pinky and grinned. "Go. Your go ddamn prince misses you." He nodded to Adrik and walked toward his room.

I caught Viktor and Misha before they went to their rooms, on either side of Ivan's room. "If you two hear him struggling again, come get me. I won't let him fight this alone this time. I don't care what time it Is, come get me. He needs to keep that arm still anyway. If he messes up the doctor's handiwork, he could bleed to death. Understood?"

They both nodded their heads. Viktor wrapped his glant arm around me. "Ivan is lucky to have you this time. We're all lucky to have you." He kissed the top of my head and continued to his raam.

I felt Adrik's arms around me. "How are you feeling, solnishko? Are you sore? Do you want a bath or a show

n's blood on you and I would much rather not see you in hospital scrubs," he had a small smile on

Chapter One Hundred Thirty-Seven

Sephie

We crawled into bed around 8:00 that morning. He had a few things to take care of that afternoon, so he made sure to set an alarm. I didn't want to sleep the entire day and then be awake the entire night again either. As I laid across his chest, finally feeling warmth after an entire night of being freezing in that hospital, I felt my body relax completely. My hair was still wet, so I wrapped it into a bun to keep it from soaking everything it touched. I felt Adrik's hand slowly running up and down my back, under his shirt that I was wearing. It felt like less than a minute and I was sound asleep.

I found myself on a familiar path, in front of that same house where I saw my father the last time. This time, instead of cautiously entering the house, I ran inside. He was at the piano again and stopped when he heard me come into the room.

"Peanut!" he said, standing and opening his arms to me.

"Dad! I was wondering when I was going to see you again!"

"Well, technically, this is the second time in as many days. Ivan even saw me yesterday, too, although once again, I wasn't really needed. Ivan had it covered."

I looked at him, confused. "What do you mean?"

"The accident. I wrapped my wings around you right before the truck hit you, but then Ivan turned to use his body as a shield. for you. Do you remember seeing his face, peanut?"

I nodded my head. "Yes. He looked confused and then he looked like he was in…awe?"

"Accurate. What he was seeing isn't usually seen by many people, but once again, it needed to happen. He got his wings yesterday, peanut."

I felt the tears starting to burn my eyes. "What do you mean. Is he leaving?" I asked, very seriously. "He can't die yet. He's fine. The doctors fixed him. He said he was fine." I started to panic.

My father grabbed me and pulled me to him. "No, Sephie. He's not going anywhere. He proved that he'll give his life to save yours yesterday. He's not allowed to go anywhere now. He has a job to do."

I inhaled deeply, feeling a flood of relief that Ivan wasn't dying. "But I still don't understand."

"It's quite a long story, but the short version is that Ivan's special gift, his inability to feel pain, is what was needed to protect you from what's coming. It's no coincidence that you're the one that could calm him down yesterday. You two have been tied together your entire lives, you're only just now realizing it." He cleared his throat, seeing the look of confusion still on my face. "Sephle, people have many different forms of soulmates in their lives. You and Adrik? You're the lovers. You two were always supposed to meet and fall in love. You complete each other, which is why he feels like home to you. You've fallen in love with him over and over through lifetimes. But there are other kinds of soulmates, too. You and Misha? You're here to teach Misha how to fully embrace his gift. You and Andrei? You're both here to push the other to be better. That's why he readily took on the job of being your trainer and why you keep reminding him how great he is all the time. You and Viktor? You're giving him his confidence back. There's more to the story of how he ended up in a Syrian prison. You're helping to correct that. And you and Stephen?" He paused, smiling at me. "You're showing him how to be himself. He's got a secret no one knows about yet, but you're pushing him to be comfortable enough to share it. Now, you and Ivan. You two have a special bond. This isn't the first lifetime you two have spent together and I'm guessing it won't be the last, either. He's your protector, Sephle. He basically stole my job yesterday. I'm not even mad at him, either. His wings are way cooler than mine. His swooping is going to be marvelous tually." He looked down at me, realizing he'd been rambling. He grinned. "Ivan will always protect you. He feels compelled you. Everything he went through in his life prepared him for what's about to come. The Powers That Be still have big plans for you, so they brought out the big guns to make sure those plans are seen through to completion." He whispered, "Ivan is the big guns, in case you were wondering."

"But Misha didn't see this one coming. How did that happen?" I asked.

"No one saw this one coming, until it was almost too late. They saw an opportunity and they took it, which ultimately worked to your advantage. They weren't as coordinated as they would have been had they had more time to plan. You guys were outnumbered, 4 to 1, peanut. Clearly, they should've doubled that if they were to have any shot at taking you."

I thought for a moment, remembering the chaos of the day, but knowing that Ivan and I missed the majority of it. I sighed, still feeling grateful that we all made it out relatively unscathed.

"How are his wings cooler than yours, Dad?" I asked, smiling. I felt like watching him talk was like watching myself talk sometimes.

"Oh, Ivan got a special deal. Ivan's spent so much time walking amongst demons that he can now freely walk between both Heaven and Hell. My wings are white. I want no part of Hell. His wings are white and then they fade to black on the ends and because he's the big guns, they're crimson on the very tips. WAY cooler than mine."

I laughed. "Can I tell him this?"

He nodded his head. "He won't believe you at first, but he saw them in the accident. He just has to remember."

"How did he see them in the accident?" I was curious. I clearly remembered the look on his face before he lost consciousness.

"He saw my wings wrapped around you, but when he turned to shield you from the impact, that's the moment that he got his. He watched them come from behind him to shield you and even cover mine."

"Are you sure he's not going to die anytime soon? I can't take knowing he's going to sacrifice himself again to protect me."

"Sephie, it won't be easy and what's coming will be bad. Very bad. But you can pull him back. Adrik showed you how when he pulled you from the darkness. You can do the same for Ivan. You will do the same for Ivan." He had both hands on my shoulders, looking me in the eyes, almost like he was searing the information onto my brain. "See? Everything happens for a reason, peanut."

I smiled at him. "Now that you're out of a job, you're not leaving, are you?"

"No, not for good. I still keep an eye on you, but now that Ivan has stepped fully into his role, I'm needed even less than I was before. I'm thinking of joining an aerial acrobatics troop. Learn some new swooping techniques," he said, making a swooping motion with his arm.

"We can still talk like this sometimes, then?"

"Of course, peanut. I'm always around. Swooping." We both heard a noise outside the house. "It's time for you to go, Sephie. That's Adrik's alarm. Remember, you can pull Ivan back. You, too, can walk freely between Heaven and Hell."

The scene in front of me faded quickly and I felt Adrik's hand on the back of my neck. He was talking softly to me, trying to wake me up. I opened my eyes, still smiling at the memory of seeing my dad once again. I lifted my head to rest my chin on his chest. He smiled at me, running his finger lightly over my cheek.

"Good morning again, solnishko, You had a good dream, I take it?"

closed my eyes, nodding my head. I put my head back on his chest and hugged him tightly, I always spected there was

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Chapter One Hundred Thirty-Eight

Sephie

When we came downstairs, all the guys were in the kitchen, foraging for food. We hadn't had a chance to hire a new chef yet, and honestly it had slipped everyone's mind since we hadn't been to the house in a few weeks. It was close enough to lunch time, though, so I said, "can we tell someone that I'm extra cranky when I'm hungry and I need Vinny's for everyone as soon as possible?"

!

Misha walked to me quickly, hugging me tightly. "This. This right here is why I love you so much."

Andrei was still in his room, but Ivan appeared shortly after we walked into the kitchen. I went to him, sliding my arm around his waist gently. "How you feeling? Do you feel like you can eat?" He nodded, as he stung his good arm over my shoulders. "Good. We're getting Vinny's. Has anybody checked on Andrei in a while?" They all looked somewhat guilty. I chuckled. "I'm taking those looks as a no. I'm going to check on him, since you all clearly ha te him."

I got all the way to his room, but then stopped myself from opening the door. I walked back into the kitchen. "He doesn't sleep in the nude or anything does he?" They all laughed.

"You're safe from seeing anything extra, sestrichka." Viktor said in between his deep belly laughs.

I sighed in relief, then walked back to Andrei's room. I knocked softly just in case he was awake. I heard nothing, so I quietly opened the door and peaked in. He was sprawled out on the bed, in his underwear. Thank God he left those on. I walked over to the bed, grabbing the blanket from the end of the bed and covering him up with it. He didn't stir. I walked back to the kitchen, grabbed a bottle of water and took it back to his room, leaving it on his table for him. They'd given him pain pills at the hospital, so I was sure he was going to sleep for a while.

When I walked back in the kitchen this time, I walked to Adrik, tucking myself into his side, his arm pulling me closer.

"Food will be here shortly, gazelle."

"I can take inventory of what's in the fridge and come up with something to feed everyone tonight. Or maybe I can send someone to the store with a list?" I looked at Adrik, not sure if I could do that or not.

He smiled at me. "You're the go ddamn princess. You can do whatever you please, solnishko."

I laughed, loudly. That one caught me completely by surprise. I leaned up and kissed him. "I fu cking love you."

We heard Ivan and Misha across the kitchen. "Fu cking adorable." He smiled against my lips, as he said quietly, "we are fu cking adorable."

Adrik needed to leave to go back to the penthouse for a few meetings that afternoon. He wanted to leave Stephen with me, but I insisted that he take both Viktor and Stephen with him.

"There's like 40 guards around this property and at least as many dogs. And I'll have my adorable Russian guardian and like half an Ivan and half an Andrel. That's equal to at least 30 more guards. Clearly, I have the advantage here," I said, grinning at my math.

Adik smiled at me, leaning down to press his lips to mine, "I won't be gone long, solnishko. Let Misha know If you want someone to go to the store for you, I'll add finding a new chef to the top of the list.

my arms around him tightly, "Please be extra careful.

He kissed my forehead. "We are, solnishko. The helicopter will be here soon. I'm not taking any chances."

I sighed, feeling relief that they wouldn't be driving anywhere. I was going to have to find something to occupy my time with to keep from worrying all day until he returned.

Misha, Ivan, and I were on the couches laughing about something absurd that had just come out of appeared.

"Bubba! How do you feel?"

He gave me a half-smile. "Mostly like I got shot."

my mo uth when Andrei

"Your ability to paint a picture with words never ceases to amaze nie, Bubba." He sat on the couch next to me, pulling me to him in a rough hug with his good arm. "Are you hungry? How's your stomach?"

He thought for a minute. "I could eat."

I leaned back from him, looking offended. "Why am I the only one that has to starve when on pain meds?" I was mostly just making light of the situation, but Ivan answered me seriously.

"It's because you're a redhead, princess. You react differently to drugs and anesthesia than non-redheads."

"I do?" I asked, now curious.

He nodded his head. He started to speak but stopped himself. He glanced nervously at Misha and Andrei. "I knew a couple redheads when I was younger. I felt worse for them than I did me, if you get my drift."

My mo uth fell open, my eyes wide. I was horrified at the thought that there were boys treated worse than he was. "Loud and clear." I noticed Misha and Andrei looked at us curiously, but this was not my story to tell and I could tell Ivan did not want to get into it. I quickly stood up. "Bubba, I got you a sandwich, just on the off chance that your stomach was made of steel and you could eat when you woke up." I walked to the kitchen to grab it for him, coming back with water for everyone too.

Once Andrei had finished eating and I was satisfied that he was not going to vomit it up, I asked, "now, who wants to go for a walk with me?"

They all three stood up. I was still sitting on the couch, looking at all of them above me. "Unexpected, but I'll take it."

Andrei smirked at me. "I got shot in my shoulder, not my entire body."

Ivan laughed. "I can't feel anything anyway, so it won't matter what I do."

I just shook my head, moving them around so I could grab each of their good arms as we set off on our adventure. I wasn't planning on walking too far, as I didn't want to tire them out too much, but they kept insisting they were fine. We walked all the way to the lake, all of them heading to my favorite spot and sitting down.

The reason it was my favorite spot is because It had several seating options available. There was a fallen tree to lean against, a rock to sit on or lean against, as well as a large log as a third optian. It was perfect for the two invalids to find a mostly comfortable spot to sit.

a

sat in silence for a few minutes. 1 laughed, looking at Andrel and Misha. "The last time we were here was the day t orld found out I was the go ddamn princess."

I wander

hardly see him anymore?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Maybe he still talks about me a lot? I don't know. We do have a ton of hilariously stu pid stories, because, well, have you met me? I do stu pid shi t all the time. Maybe he talked about me enough that she thought we were still closer than we are." I looked down, tracing my finger through the dirt at my feet, making random designs. I was lost in thought.

over Max. He was my best friend for a long time, but we barely spoke anymore. Most of that was my fault. I couldn't tell him everything anymore, but he also didn't push to see nie very hard. I sighed, trying to push him from my mind.

"You met Max after a really difficult time in your life, Sephie. It's easy to ignore things about people when you're traumatized and trying to not be completely alone. He hasn't been as good of a friend to you as you have to him," Ivan said. He was looking at me thoughtfully, almost sympathetically.

I smiled at him. "You sound like Adrik." I laughed. "I think he secretly ha tes Max."

Ivan laughed as well. "It's not that secret, princess."

Chapter One Hundred Thirty-Nine

Sephie

“I KNEW IT!” We were all laughing now.

“Ivan’s right. We all watched him ditch you that night in the restaurant, after not seeing you for a week, for some random girl who’s name he probably can’t remember,” Misha added.

I shrugged my shoulders again. “That’s just Max, though. He always did that.”

“No, that’s an as shole, spider monkey. As sholes do that,” Andrei said.

I snapped my fingers at him, pointing at him. “Language, mister. Language.”

“Don’t try to change the subject just because we’re right,” Andrei said quietly.

I thought for a moment, inhaling deeply. I loved the smell of the meadow, the dirt, the trees, the grass, the lake. Everything felt fresh here. Alive. It helped me recharge to come here. I looked at all three of them, smiling. “You are right. You’re all right. I’ve been hanging on to him because I was scared to be alone without him. That was the hardest part about losing my mo m and being sent to my uncle. I felt completely alone. Even though I had a mostly sober uncle for the first year or so, it was still living with a stranger, so it was almost the same as being completely alone. When I met Max, I suddenly didn’t feel so alone anymore.”

I was staring at the dirt at my feet, still tracing patterns with my fingers, but I heard one of them get up. As soon as he sat down next to me, I didn’t even have to look. I knew it was Misha.

“You’re not alone anymore, gazelle. You’ll always have us to annoy the shi t out of you,” he said, his wide smile across his face.

I heard the other two get up and come closer to me. Andrei sat in front of me while Ivan sat next to me, leaning his good shoulder into mine. Andrei looked at me, more seriously than I’d ever seen him, “we’re not going anywhere, spider monkey. You’re never going to be alone again.” He reached out and grabbed my ankle, squeezing it. Ivan didn’t say anything, he just leaned over and kissed my cheek. I had tears in my eyes at their response to me thinking out loud. I leaned my head over to Misha’s shoulder, then to Ivan’s, smiling at Andrei the whole time.

“I love you guys.”

All at once, they said, “we love you too, Sephie.”

We sat and talked for a while longer until my bu tt started to get sore from sitting on the ground. We stood up to walk back to the house. When Ivan stood up, he swayed back and forth before catching himself. I held on to him, as best I could, somewhat panicked that he was going to go down completely again. He stood for a moment, waiting for the feeling to pass.

“You okay, Squishy? What’s going on in there?” I asked, concerned that we’d overdid it with him. He lost a lot of blood yesterday. He looked at me and I could see a flash of fear before he masked it and got control again. “I’m okay. I just stood up too fast.

“Li ar. Are you okay to walk back?” He nodded his head. “Okay, when we get back, you’re taking a nap. No arguing. You didn’t sleep this morning when we got to the house, did you?”.

He shook his head no. I saw the fear flash on his face briefly and knew why he didn’t want to sleep. I grabbed his good arm, putting it around my shoulders, and wrapping my arm around his waist. I looked at him, smiled, but said as seriously as I could, “If you start to feel yourself slipping, tell me. When we get back, you can nap on the couch.” He started to protest. “With me,

Chapter One Hundred Thirty-Nine

Squishy,” I said quietly, so the other two wouldn’t hear. He looked down at me, a look of relief on his face.

We walked slowly back to the house. I was once again proud of Ivan for making it back, mostly on his own. He went to his bedroom to change into more comfortable pants.

“Bubba, how’s your shoulder feel now? When do you take your next pain pill?” I asked when we got back to the house.

He looked at the clock. “Not for a few hours. My shoulder is sore, but it’s fine. I think I’m doing better than Ivan, honestly.”

“You’re not wrong. He lost so much blood yesterday.” My eyes went wide, lost in the memory of the puddle of blood under us while we waited for Adrik and Viktor to find us. I looked back to Andrei. “I literally don’t know how he’s still alive.”

“You’re both very difficult to ki ll,” Andrei said, smiling.

We waited for Ivan to come back from his room, but after ten minutes, we still didn’t see him. I started to worry, so I went to find him. I knocked on his door but heard no response. I opened it slowly, hoping that he was decent. The scene before me was not one I thought I would ever see.

Ivan was sitting on the end of his bed, his head in his hand, sobbing. I quietly walked in the room, closing the door behind me. I sat down next to him, wrapping my arms around him. I rested my chin on his good shoulder. I knew I didn’t have the words to make his pain go away, but I could at least give him the one thing he’d never had since he left home. Comfort.

We had been sitting in silence, while Ivan quietly sobbed when I heard the door open. Misha stuck his head in just enough to make sure we were okay. I smiled at him but made it clear that he should leave. He nodded, understanding. The door closed and I rested my chin on Ivan’s shoulder once again. I just sat with him, rubbing his back while he let out what was probably years of pent-up emotion from everything he’d been through.

He finally got enough control that he could speak. “I’m sorry, princess. I shouldn’t do that.”

I chuckled. “Says who?”

He sat up straighter, so he could look at me. His eyes still showing nothing but pain. “Says me.”

I thought for a moment, trying to find the perfect words. “Ivan, do you know how special you are?”

He looked at me questioningly. He wasn’t sure how to take my question, as being special had gotten him experimented on, so that wasn’t necessarily a good thing. I smiled at him, understanding his confusion.

“Okay, bad phrasing. What do you remember from the moment of the crash?”

He thought for a moment. “I heard the metal crunching and I turned toward you.” He su cked in a breath, clearly remembering what he saw. He turned to me. “I… I don’t know how to say it without you thinking I’m crazy.”

“You saw wings around me, didn’t you?”

His eyes went wide in shock, as he nodded his head.

“But that’s not all you saw, is it?” He looked at me, like he wasn’t sure he trusted his memory. My hand was rubbing his back gently. I laughed quietly at him. “Ivan, I already know what you saw, so you can tell me.”

“You saw it too??” He was clearly shocked at this point.

head no, bringing back confusion to his face. “No, I didn’t see what you saw. What you saw.

everyone to see. Just you.” I reached and grabbed his hand. “Ivan, those were your wings you saw. Well, not at first. They changed color on you, didn’t they?” He nodded his head. “The first pair of wings were my dad. He’s been watching over me for my entire life, but after yesterday, I have a new protector.” I squeezed his hand. “Those were your wings, Ivan,” I said, quietly. Trying to get him to realize exactly what I was saying.

“But, how? I’m not dead,” he asked, clearly still confused.

Chapter One Hundred Forty

Sephie

I couldn't help but chuckle. "Don't worry, that one was hard for me to grasp too. I'm still not entirely sure about how it works. We've been tied together since we were born. We were always supposed to meet, and you were always meant to be my protector. You proved that you're ready for the role yesterday when you used your body to shield mine from the impact. At least, that's what my dad told me." He stayed silent, still thoughtful, but he had a tight grip on my hand. I smiled at him. This is a lot. I'm impressed he's not freaking out.

"But they…my…they were black. Does that mean I'm evil?"

"No, Ivan. You're not evil. And they're not entirely black. According to my dad, who is jealous of your wings, for the record, they're white and then they fade to black and because you're extra special, they're crimson on the tips. He called you the big guns." I grabbed his bicep, trying to wrap my hands around it. "I can see where they would get that idea."

He laughed but was still shocked. He was quiet for a moment longer, then looked at me. "Sephie, I still don't understand. How do you know all this? How do you know what I saw?"

"When we first got to Italy, at the ranch house, when I was asleep for like ever. I was still stuck in that same nightmare loop that I was in on the plane." He closed his eyes, flinching at the memory. I hated to bring it up, because I knew it affected him almost as badly as it did Adrik. "Adrik could pull me out of that loop. When he finally pulled me out for the last time, I was able to talk to my dad. He told me he's been watching over me my whole life and that everything that's happened to this point was for a reason. Like the way the kidnap plan at the ball went so horribly wrong? It was meant to happen that way so that you guys would take Misha's gut feelings seriously. He's the only one that was adamant about that being a bad plan, but nobody listened to him. Now, you all listen to him." He stayed quiet, still mulling over everything I was telling him. "Everything that has happened to me, everything that has happened to you, it's all for a larger purpose. I don't know what yet, but my dad told me that you've spent so much time walking among the demons that you can now walk freely between Heaven and Hell." I thought for a moment, remembering the last thing he told me before I woke up. "He also told me I could do the same. I don't know what that means yet. But he said you're my protector and that you've always felt compelled to protect me."

He laughed. "How do you know that…" he said, almost to himself.

"He explained it to me like this: there are different kinds of soulmates. Adrik and I were always meant to meet and fall in love, probably over and over again through lifetimes. You and I have apparently been together in a different capacity over lifetimes too. I don't know if you're always my protector, but it wouldn't surprise me if you were. You're so darn good at it."

He smiled, squeezing my hand. "I have always felt compelled to protect you. Even when I wasn't convinced you were different from the other girls, despite Boss putting us on you to make sure you stayed safe, which he'd never, ever done before. When you stitched me up in your kitchen? I tried to make you angry to see if you would turn into a different person. You just put me in my place in front of everyone and went about helping me, completely unaffected. Anytime I would be grumpy or angry around his other girlfriends, it was almost like it would piss them off and they'd turn into another person. People act differently when they're afraid or angry. Especially those people that are being fake or pretending to be someone they're not. It's like they can't keep the act up when they're angry too, so they show who they really are. But you? You turned into my emotional support sloth," he said laughing at the memory. I couldn't help but laugh, too. That was definitely one of my finer moments. "Even calling you a princess didn't phase you. Hell, you adopted it right then and now you're the goddamn princess."

"Don't you forget it, either," I said, poking him in the arm.

"When you stitched me up, despite me being an asshole to you, I knew you were completely different. I started to see what Adrik saw in you the first time he looked at you. That's when I knew I would always protect you." He Inhaled deeply. "When that truck hit us, all I could think about was making sure you were okay, even if it was the last thing I did

I felt the tears burning my eyes, threatening to fall. I sniffed, trying to hold them back. I leaned my head on his shoulder, grabbing his hand again. "Well, if we're connected, you're not allowed to leave me. The princess says so. You have to listen to the princess." He chuckled. "I don't think that's how it's going to play out, anyway. My dad said what is coming is bad. Very bad, even. But there's a grander plan for all of us. No idea what that plan is, but it's grand."

We sat in silence for a minute. "Ivan, I want you to know that I can pull you from your darkness, the same way Adrik pulled me from mine. You don't need to be scared of it ever again."

He didn't say anything, he just put his giant arm around me and pulled me to him. He kissed the top of my head as he held me close. I could feel him trembling as he fought back the tears. He sniffled, then said, "I do a good job of keeping it away, but hospitals…"

"You don't need to explain anything about that to me. I share your hatred of those places." He squeezed my shoulders.

"I remember what you told me before we got to the house, princess. He really will love you no matter what. We all love you no matter what."

Chapter One Hundred Forty-One

Sephie

It was my turn to fight back the tears. I laughed, trying to smile through the pain. “It seems like a small thing, comparatively. But most normal people want to reproduce at some point. I look at all the other bosses and it’s like they’re single-handedly trying to boost the world’s population they have so many kids. I assume Adrik would be the same, which makes me worry that he’s not going to want me when he finds out. Or worse, he’ll keep me around while he has a child with someone else.”

He cursed under his breath. “He would never do that, Sephie. We wouldn’t let him do that. And he doesn’t even like kids. You should hear what he says about the other bosses and their affinity for procreation.”

I sat up straighter to look at him. “Really?”

He nodded. “He won’t care that you can’t have kids. He might try to kill the doctor that did it to you. I’m assuming it was not a happy situation if it made you hate doctors in general. But it won’t make him love you any less.”

I chewed on my bottom lip for a minute. “Ivan, I’ve literally never told anyone about this. Even Ms. Jackson doesn’t know. It happened before I met her.”

“You can tell me, Sephie. Sometimes it’s good to get stuff out. I felt better after I told you my secret.”

I took a deep breath. “When my uncle would beat me, his favorite thing to do was kick me in the stomach. He thought that because all the women he hung out with were, uh, easy, that I would be too. He would scream at me, calling me a whore, and tell me that he would make sure I wouldn’t have a little brat to feed as he was kicking me in my stomach. As I’m sure you can feed figure out, he did a lot of damage there. I started hemorrhaging blood one night. I tried to hide it from him, but all I could do was sit on the toilet and bleed. It was bad. There was so much blood. Of course, he was drunk, so he couldn’t take me to the emergency room and he wouldn’t call an ambulance. He called one of his buddies who ‘knew a guy’ that would do back-room. abortions and procedures for the seedier side of town. He was a respected doctor during the day, but would perform procedures for extra cash at night. My uncle was convinced I was pregnant and was having a miscarriage, so he got his buddy to take us to this ‘doctor.’ That guy did an ultrasound and found a bunch of scar tissue on my uterus from my uncle’s repeated beatings, but my uncle just knew it was because I’d been pregnant and didn’t tell him. He told the doctor to take my uterus. I was still 16 at the time, so not legally an adult. My uncle had legal rights over me, so the doctor performed the surgery, despite me trying to tell him it was because my uncle had kicked me so many times.” I felt the tears falling. I wiped my nose on my sleeve, not even slightly concerned what I looked like in front of Ivan. “I never really thought much about kids until I met Adrik. I assumed he was like the other bosses and would want like his own army of children at some point. It’s the last thing that scares me. I’m terrified he’ll leave because I can’t give him children.”

He pulled me closer to him, his giant hand rubbing my arm lightly. “You have to tell him, Sephie. He won’t look at you any differently.” He kissed the top of my head again. “Sephie, we all think you’re the strongest woman we’ve ever met. This only-adds to that. You’ve endured things that would cripple most men and you’ve done it all on your own. I just want you to know that you’re not alone anymore. We’ll always be here for you. No matter what.”

The tears were coming full force now. There was no stopping them. I couldn’t talk. I just rested my head against his giant shoulder. I sucked in a breath, trying to talk a few times, but couldn’t get the words out in between sobs. I just held up my pinky, completely giving in to the pain when he readily grabbed it with his.

Adrik

1

I tried to hurry my meetings up as much as possible so I could get back to the house. It made me nervous to be away from Sephle right now. I had wanted her to come with me, but I knew she wouldn’t want to leave Andrel and Ivan. So, I was left to rush through meetings.

My last meeting of the day was with Armando. At least he would understand my desire to get back to Sephie,

Viktor walked in with Armando and Giana. I was surprised to see Glana with him but greeted her warmly. Sephie seemed to get along with her and Ivan didn’t totally hate her, so that was all I needed to know. She smiled shyly at me.

“Is Sephie not with you?” Armando asked, sitting down across from my desk.

“No. We had a, uh, situation yesterday,” I said.

Armando looked shocked. “Is she okay? What happened? You didn’t tell me!”

“They tried to grab her in the city. She had Ivan, Andrei, and Misha with her, but they separated them. Ivan almost died but managed to get her to safety. Andrei got shot, but he’s also okay. She’s safe. She wanted to keep an eye on Ivan and Andrei today.” Armando looked shocked. I looked at Giana, who looked completely terrified.

She surprised me by speaking up. “Why do they want her so bad?”

1 exhaled. “Various reasons, depending on who you’re talking about. She’s been privy to more information about the organization than pretty much anyone else, including me. That makes her a target now.”

Giana looked down at her hands in her lap. “Ignorance really is bliss,” she mumbled.

Sephie was right. She is funny in her own right.

Chapter One Hundred Forty-Two

Adrik

I looked at Armando, preferring to get to business. “Any news on Dario and Massimo?”

He nodded. “They’ve made plans to visit Trino at the end of this week. I’ve got people within Trino’s organization that are keeping tabs on Lorenzo and Anthony for me. With Trino’s blessing, of course. They’re still down there, with no immediate plans to leave. I’m not sure if it’s a good thing if they all end up there together, or if it’s a bad thing.”

I rested my head in my hand, thinking of the potential outcomes. I guess we’ll know more by the end of the week. After yesterday, I’m daring them to join forces. It’ll give me more reason to kill them all. I’m beginning to wonder why I need any of them, at this point.”

Armando looked thoughtful, instead of shocked like I was expecting. “You know, Boss. I’ve thought the same thing recently. Why can’t you run the city yourself? Why do you need them? The people of the city love you much more than any of the other bosses. They’ll stand with you, if it comes to it.”

“You’re just as popular with the people, Mando. And I still need you, as well. But the rest of them? My patience is growing dangerously thin with every single one of them, I said, running my hand through my hair.

“Do you think it warrants you taking a trip to see Trino? I think it’s important that Sephie meets him now, if he’s meeting with all the other bosses. We need to know we can count on him, in this plan,” he said.

“That’s not a bad point. Just not while everyone else is down there.” I looked at my watch. “I’ll talk to him tomorrow, I need to give Ivan and Andrei some time to heal before we go anywhere. I can’t afford to have any holes in my security right now”

“Agreed. What happened exactly?”

“They hit the vehicle that Ivan and Sephie were in, then blocked them in, cutting Andrei and Misha off from them. They tried to get back to Ivan and Sephie, but were under gunfire immediately. Ivan and Sephie managed to escape, but I’m glad Stephen taught Sephie how to shoot. She took out more men than Ivan did yesterday.”

Giana’s eyes went wide. Armando saw the fear on her face and reached over, grabbing her hand. His thumb rubbing circles lightly on the back of her hand. I looked from Armando to Giana, then back to Armando. “It wouldn’t be a bad idea to teach her how to shoot too. I don’t know how bad it’s about to get, but I have a feeling it won’t be pretty. How’s it going with putting together your own security detail?”

Armando looked at Giana, likely unsure about teaching her how to use a gun. “We’ve got more interviews lined up this week. Viktor has been invaluable in this process. We’ve already hired 10 men that are highly skilled, so they won’t need much training. They can start almost immediately. We’re hoping to hire 10 more, at least. I can return to my house once that happens.”

“You’re welcome to stay here as long as you need, Mando. It’ll keep Giana closer to other people, too. You’re all she has if you go to your house. I hear Ms. Jackson is helping to keep you both entertained here, at least.”

Giana smiled at the mention of Ms. Jackson. “She’s a remarkable woman. Did you know she used to be a spy?”

I raised my eyebrow, but stayed silent. Sephie never mentioned that, if she knew. It would explain how Ms. Jackson knows Russian though, I quickly did the math in my head. The Cold War. Likely the end of the Cold War, If my estimate of her age was correct. I smiled to myself. I knew I liked her.

Armande looked surprised, swearing under his breath. “She is a fascinating woman. I’ll consider your offer. It would be nice to maybe have a few quiet days away at the house, but be able to return here when needed.”

“Those apartments are yours, for as long as you want them. I’ll let you know what I find out from Trino tomorrow. Keep me informed if anything changes with Dario and Massimo.” I stood up, offering him my hand.

He stood and grasped my hand firmly in his. “Will do. And as always, thank you for everything, Boss.”

I looked to Giana. She looked like she wanted to hide behind Armando, but was trying to be brave. I gave her a half-smile. “It’s good to see you again, Giana.”

She took a deep breath and extended her hand to me. “It’s good to see you too, sir. And thank you again for everything you’ve done for us while we’ve been here. Please give my well wishes to Sephie, Ivan, and Andrei.”

I took her hand, amused at her chutzpah. “I will. Hopefully they’ll be back here in a few days.”

Viktor escorted them out while I finished up some minor paperwork before we could leave for the day. I was anxious to get back to the house. Stephen and Viktor walked into my office a few minutes later. “The helicopter will be here in 10 minutes, Boss.”

“Have you heard how Andrei and Ivan are doing today?” I asked.

Viktor sighed. I felt a twinge of panic as I knew he wasn’t going to have good news. “Andrei is fine. He’s been off and on sleeping, like he usually does when he’s seriously hurt. Misha said they went for a walk this afternoon, once Andrei had gotten up. He said it was fine until they left the lake to go back to the house. Ivan was unsteady on his feet when he stood up, but managed to make it back to the house, with Sephie’s help. She was going to force him to take a nap on the couch, so she could stay with him, when they got back. He went to his room to change, and Misha thinks he ended up breaking down. Sephie went to check on him when he didn’t come out, but then she didn’t come out, so Misha stuck his head in the door. Ivan was losing it. Sephie was trying to comfort him. Misha said they stayed in Ivan’s room for almost an hour, but when they finally came out, they both looked like they’d been crying the entire time. He knows Ivan won’t talk about anything in front of them, but he suspects he’s told Sephie everything. Sephie told me in the hospital that he had, so Misha’s right. Boss, she’s the only one that’s’ been able to pull him out when he’s haunted by his past because he has to go to the hospital. I saw her do it in the middle of the night when everyone else was asleep. It was just like you did for her when we were on the plane. I’ve never seen anything like it, with either of them. She told me in the hospital that their demons recognized each other,” he said, chuckling.

“I suspect their shared hatred of doctors has something to do with that. She broke down in the hospital, after she talked to the doctor in the hall. She told me that Ivan sacrificed himself to keep her safe. She said when the truck hit them, she clearly remembers him turning toward her to use his body as a shield to protect her. She thinks it’s her fault that they got hurt.”

“How could any of that be her fault?” Stephen asked.

“I don’t know. She feels responsible because they’re trying to get to her. I told It wasn’t her fault, but I’m not sure she believes me yet. It makes me want to kill the other bosses and just be done with it. I’m done with her being put in danger.

“We all are,” Viktor said as he pulled his phone out, typing a message, then putting his phone back in his pocket. “I ordered food. If she’s been looking after Ivan all afternoon, she likely hasn’t had time to do anything else. I know how he gets when he has to go to a hospital, It’s…a lot.”

This is why
her favorite giant Russian security master, Stephen said, smiling.

Chapter One Hundred Forty-Three

Adrik

As we landed, I thought back to the first time I left in the morning without waking her. She was so excited to see me that night. I smiled to myself, thinking about that night. The first night she'd given herself entirely to me. I still couldn't get enough of her… It might be worse now, even.

I couldn't help but feel slightly disappointed when she wasn't at the landing pad to greet me this time, but I knew she was busy looking after Ivan and Andrei. I wasn't jealous when she spent the night next to Ivan in the hospital, but I desperately missed her. I knew she needed to be there for him. I didn't realize how much she needed to be with him until Viktor told me what she was able to do for Ivan earlier. It made me happy that she could help him. But it didn't make me miss her any less that night.

We walked into the house to the sound of laughter from the kitchen. This is a good sign. We stepped into the doorway and her eyes landed on mine. She gave me that smile that threatened to stop my heart every single time and immediately ran to me. She jumped into my arms, wrapping her legs around my waist. Her lips found mine immediately, kissing me passionately. I love coming home to this woman. She broke the kiss, looking deeply into my eyes. "I missed you." I reached up and pulled her back to me, kissing her even more passionately than she had kissed me. "I missed you more," I said, smiling against her lips.

She giggled as she unwrapped herself from me. She turned around to walk back to the counter, but I caught her and pulled her back toward me. I needed a moment to calm down before she was allowed to move from in front of me. I pressed myself into her. She just grabbed my arms and wrapped them around her waist, with her arms over mine. I leaned down to her ear and whispered, "thank you, solnishko." She squeezed my hands, grinning at me.

Viktor looked at her, surprised. "You managed to cook dinner, sestrichka?"

"I had plenty of help from Misha and the two invalids. I would just like to calm everyone's nerves, though. No broccoli was murdered in the making of this meal."

We all laughed. Viktor looked at her, "I owe you an apology, then! I ordered food, thinking you wouldn't have had time to make. dinner."

"No apology needed, my giant Russian bear. You haven't tried it yet. It could su ck. It's good that you brought back-up," she smiled at him, causing him to smile broadly back at her. "Also? Between all of us, food does not go to waste in this house. We can all have second dinner later. It'll be fine."

I turned her around to face me, brushing the curls back from her face. She put her hands on my chest, smiling warmly at me. I could see that her eyes were a little puffy, but otherwise, there was no trace of her tumultuous afternoon. I pressed my lips to hers. "I'm so lucky," I said quietly, kissing her forehead.

"How was work? Anything fun happen?" she asked as she went back to the counter to finish up what she had been working on when we got home.

"Actually yes," I said, following her and posting up on the opposite counter, after stealing a bite of the bacon she was chopping up. She looked at me, with her eyebrow raised, but continued chopping. 1 crossed my arms across my chest, looking at all the guys. I couldn't help the small smile that came across my face, I knew I was going to enjoy this conversation. "Did you know Ms. Jackson is a former spy, solnishko?"

She stopped chopping and looked to me. She knew. "Did she finally tell you?" she asked. The guys were all shocked to hear the

ell me Olane

Mana told ne," I said. I scanned everyone's

scanned everyone's faces, knowing they all knew how

"What? Giana told you? Really??" She continued to chop for a minute, then stopped. "Really? Does that girl not understand how being a spy works? She's going to tell the Russians that she barely knows that Ms. Jackson used to spy on their country and expect it to go well?"

"Well, she didn't go into detail, so technically you just told the Russians that Ms. Jackson used to spy on our country," I said, laughing. I was prepared to run as fast as necessary to avoid flying knives.

She turned and looked at me, a serious look on her face. "Sh it."

We all laughed. Her cheeks turned almost as red as her hair. I walked to her, sliding one arm around her waist, the other slid the knife away from her toward Andrei. He passed it further down the counter. That was all it took for Sephie to finally laugh.

"G*ddammit I'm an id iot," she said in between laughing.

I kissed her temple. "You have nothing to worry about, solnishko. There's a reason we live here and not in Russia. Ms. Jackson's secret is safe with us."

She looked at me and I saw the flash of pain in her eyes before she quickly masked it, smiling to hide everything from me once more. She finished up what she was doing, making conversation with everyone, like everything was normal. She gave Misha instructions on how to finish, saying she needed to run to the restroom. She disappeared quickly.

As soon as she was out of the kitchen, Ivan looked at me. "You're gonna want to go check on her. It's been a rough day. She's not as okay as she'd like us all to believe."

I took the back stairs, expecting her to be in our bedroom, but it was completely dark. I noticed the bedroom across the hall was open. The balcony, I walked in, feeling the cool air coming in. When I stepped onto the balcony, I startled her. She was standing at the railing. She wiped her face, smiling. "It's okay. I'm okay. I just needed a minute. I'm okay, I promise."

"You're not okay, Sephie and you don't need to pretend that you are for my benefit. What's wrong?" I went to her, wiping the few tears that were still escaping down her cheeks.

"We don't have that kind of time right now." She sighed. "But I can't seem to keep my mo uth sh ut and I keep putting others in danger." She bit her bottom lip, trying to hold back the tears I knew were threatening to fall.

I pulled her to me, holding her close. "None of this is your fault, Sephie."

"But it is. It has been from the beginning. I mouthed off to Anthony in the hallway, which pi ssed him off and made him choke me. That's what started this whole mess and I just keep digging myself in deeper with these people. I should not be allowed around dangerous people. They all seem to want to ki ll me for various reasons that I caused. You should get out while you can. I'll make you want to ki ll me soon enough." She took a step back from me, crossing her arms across her chest. She wouldn't look at me.

I was too stunned to react right away, which only made it worse. The tears started to fall. She put her hands over her face, sobbing. When I went to pull her to me, she tensed. "Can I just have a minute, please? I just want to be alone right now."

I didn't know what to do. I stood there a moment more, trying to decide what to do. "Please? Just leave me alone right now," she said, this time with an edge to her voice.

be downstairs, I said, squeezing her arm.

Chapter One Hundred Forty-Four

Adrik

I walked back in the kitchen, looking straight at Ivan. He looked at me with a knowing look. “That doesn’t look good. Come with me,” he said as he walked into the next room. “Where is she?” he asked once we were out of ear shot of everyone else.

“On the balcony.”

He nodded, walking to the front door. He walked down the front steps, into the middle of the driveway before he stopped. “Boss, I’m going to tell you what she told me this afternoon, but only because she’s going to try to sabotage your relationship if I don’t. She trusted me with this secret and it was one I intended to keep. She’s so terrified that this will make you not want her anymore, that she’s going to do everything in her power to see that through to fruition before she tells you.”

“Whatever you’re about to tell me won’t make me love her any less.”

“I told her that, but she won’t believe me. She’s probably not going to believe you at first, either.” He sighed, running his usable hand through his goatee. “Boss, she can’t have children. That’s why she hates doctors, too. She was forced to have a hysterectomy when she was 16 by a dirty doctor that her uncle paid.”

I felt a rage build inside me. “WHAT?”

“She said when her uncle used to beat her, he would kick her repeatedly in her stomach. He thought that since he hung out with whores that Sephie was just like them. He would kick her, call her names, and tell her she wasn’t going to ever bring home another mouth to feed. She hemorrhaged one night and started bleeding profusely. It was likely due to the repeated kicks to her stomach that he gave her. He took her to this doctor who did an ultrasound and found extensive scar tissue. Any reasonable human would’ve known it was from the beatings, but her uncle thought she had gotten pregnant without him knowing. He told the doctor to take her uterus. She pleaded with him not to do it and told him it was because of her uncle’s beatings, but she was 16. Her uncle had guardian rights over her still. The doctor performed the procedure against her will.”

I was so angry that I could barely see straight, but I saw the tears in Ivan’s eyes as he told me this story. Just when I thought her past couldn’t get any worse, I find this out. I didn’t even care about children. That part, the part she thought was the most important, was the least important to me.

“She’s terrified that you’re going to get rid of her because she can’t give you children. Or, and this one was really fucked up that her mind would even consider it, that you would keep her around while you had children with another woman.”

I suddenly felt like I had been punched in the gut. “How? How could she even think I would do such a disgusting thing to her?”

“It’s not her thinking that, Adrik. It’s what he beat into her. It’s his programming that she’s still struggling to get free of. We all know how much she loves you. You know how much she loves you. This isn’t her. It’s him. It’s the last hold he still has on her.”

“It’s a good thing she already killed him or I would find him and kill him myself.”

“She did what now? She killed him?” He looked Impressed, Proud, even.

was part of the nightmare loop she was stuck in when we were on the plane. She had blocked it out

hol e night. The whipping, all of it. Instead of just slicing his Achilles tendon; she

said she stood over him and watched him die. He reached for her

Into his heart. She sal

could remen

that’s impressive.”

“Right? I’ve honestly never been more proud of her. That fucker got off easy, as far as I’m concerned,” I said, starting to pace back and forth. I was still trying to control my anger over the doctor forcing a procedure on her against her will. I stopped in front of him, looking at him in the eyes. “How do I make her believe that I don’t give two shits about her not being able to have children? Hell, it actually makes her more attractive to me now. All the sex I could ever want with literally none of the consequences? Who doesn’t want that? How do I fix this? She asked me to leave her alone, which is why I came back downstairs without her.”

He thought for a moment. “You pulled her out of her darkness on the plane and at the ranch house. She told me you did. She did it for me when I was in surgery and the entire night in the hospital. You can pull her out of this, but you’re fighting old. programming that has literally been beaten into her. It’s not going to go away quickly. You’re going to have to be patient and reassure her a lot, I think. It takes a lot of time and repetition to break old programming and form new. But I have no doubt you can pull her out of this. It’s part of the reason you two were meant to be, I think.”

“What if she doesn’t want to talk to me when I go back up there? She had that voice, man. You know the one.” I was suddenly worried that she would slip back to where she was at on the plane where she wouldn’t let anyone touch her. “What if she won’t let me touch her again?”

“She’s going to try to push you away, because that’s the easiest thing for her to do right now. She’s dealt with a lot. She just had more put on her yesterday. But there’s a reason this came up now. This is the final hurdle you have to get over before she can. really believe you’re not going anywhere. Adrik, she’s terrified to be alone. She might be telling you to leave her alone right now, but that’s the last thing she really wants. She talked to all of us about it at the lake today. That’s why she holds onto Max. Being alone got her beat by her uncle, a forced medical procedure, and almost killed. It makes more sense why she can’t let go of him if you look at it like that. You can’t listen to her right now. It’s not Sephie talking anyway. We all know she can’t keep her hands off you.”

I was staring at the gravel on the driveway as I listened to his words. Sephie was right. Wise well beyond his years. I nodded my head. “If she refuses to talk to me, I’m sending you in with her. I know you two share something that the rest of us can’t understand. Maybe you can get through to her if I can’t.”

He chuckled. “It’s good to have a backup plan, but you won’t need it. You’ll get through to her.

Chapter One Hundred Forty-Five

Adrik

I walked quickly up the steps to the front door, not sure I believed his words, but hoping that he was right. I took the steps, two at a time, and walked back to the balcony, hoping she hadn't disappeared while I was talking to Ivan. My mind was racing, my heart was racing, but most of all I just wanted to hold her. And maybe find that doctor and put a bullet in his head, but I'd save that for later. Right now, she needed me more than I needed revenge.

She was sitting in the chair, her knees pulled up to her chest, her face buried in her arms. I could hear her softly crying as I walked out onto the balcony. It was starting to get much cooler. Fall nights meant the sun set much earlier. There was barely any daylight left. I was worried about her getting cold. Without thinking, I scooped her up from the chair and went to the bed. Thankfully, she didn't protest. Or punch me.

I sat with her in my arms, her still curled up in a tight ball rocking back and forth slightly, for a few minutes, trying to find the right words to say. "Sephie, can you look at me?" She just shook her head no. At least she's responding. "Sephie, Ivan told me. I know." She froze. "Sephie, I don't even like kids. I think it's dangerous to bring children into my world. They're a vulnerability and it's also not fair to the children. I was 7 the first time someone made an attempt on my life to get to my father. No kid should have to deal with that. I decided long ago that I never wanted to bring children into my world and I haven't looked back." As I talked, I ran my hands down her arms, trying to coax her to look at me. The more I talked, the more of her eyes I started to see. I leaned over and turned the lamp on beside the bed. I knew she was going to need to search. I was just hoping it would be sooner rather than later. "Sephie, I love you. I've loved you from the moment I saw you in the restaurant. I loved you before I knew you existed. There was a part of me that longed for what we have even before I knew you were real. I was beginning to lose hope that I would ever find it. And then I met you. You've made my life infinitely better, Sephie. All our lives infinitely better. I love you. Always and forever."

She slowly raised her head to look at me. I could clearly see the doubt written all over her face, her eyes searching mine. She held my gaze, looking for what she was always worried she would find, but never did. I couldn't help but smile at her. "Sephie, you're never going to find what you're looking for. It doesn't exist." She dropped her gaze and my heart sank. I was worried I had ruined the moment, but she lifted her eyes again, stopping at my chest. She moved like she was going to touch me, but stopped herself. I could see the internal struggle she was going through clearly on her face. Her eyebrows furrowed.

"You really don't care?" she asked. She still wouldn't look me in the eye. She was still staring at my chest. Her hands started to fidget.

"Sephie, this makes you more attractive to me, if I'm being honest. We can have all the se x we want and never have to worry about any of the consequences. I assumed you were on birth control or something, which is why I've never brought this up before, because you never had a period. I should've had this talk before. You wouldn't have been terrified this whole time that I was going to leave you." I hooked her fidgeting fingers into mine. She dropped her knees, crossing them in front of her. She held my hand in both of hers, staring at it, turning it over, anything to occupy her hands. I couldn't help but smile at her because she was so focused on this making her mean less to me, when, in reality, it made her mean more to me. "Sophie, I want to marry you. When all of this is over with the bosses and things calm down, I want to make you mine. This doesn't change that. Nothing will ever change that." I reached down and lifted her chin gently so she would look at me again. Her eyes were softening, but there was still doubt there, still fearful. I leaned in and pressed my lips to hers, trying to think of any way I could to convince her to believe my words. Her hands quieted and I felt the tiniest of pulls on my hand as I kissed her. I put both of my hands on either side of her face, deepening the kiss. She let me, but didn't respond right away. I kept going anyway. Finally, I felt her hands on my shirt, gently pulling me toward her. I stopped, kissing her forehead, and looked in her eyes again. Softer. Less doubt. Less fear. "I love you, solnishko. I will always love you. will always want you with me, by my side. Always."

Her breath caught and I could see the tears forming in her eyes. In the dim light, it made the colors of her eyes dance. I smiled at her, kissing her once more. "You're still beautiful even when you cry." She reached up and lightly traced her finger over my cheek, along my jawline. She loved running her fingers through my stubble. I was happy that she wanted to. She leaned over and klased me gently. She kept her face close to mine.

"You really don't care?" she asked again, her eyes still searching.

"I really don't care. I really do love you," I said, smiling at her. Finally. Finally, a small smile crept across her face. Her eyes were softer. The doubt and fear almost completely gone.

"I really do love you too," she said, her smile growing.

"Enough to marry me instead of Andrei?" I asked, my head cocked to the side. She grinned at me. God, I love her.

She dropped her gaze, taking my hand back in both of hers. She sighed. "Don't tell Andrei," she said as she looked back at me, "but he never had a chance.

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Chapter 146

Chapter One Hundred Forty-Six

Adrik

We stayed in the extra room for a few hours. While she was mostly better, I knew she was still overwhelmed with everything she's had to deal with. To be honest, I was enjoying the extra time with her all to myself. I loved that the guys loved her and she loved them. I loved that I didn't have to worry as much when I was away from her because I knew they would protect her. But I also loved these moments when it was just the two of us together.

We had laid down on the bed, with her across my chest in her favorite spot. As we were talking, my stomach interrupted the conversation, growling loudly. She laughed. "At least it wasn't mine for once." She sat up, pulling me up with her. "We should get you some food." She paused for a moment. "Do you think the guys are all in their rooms now?"

"Probably. Why?" I asked.

"Not in the most social mood," she said dismissively.

As we got to the bottom of the stairs, I stopped her. "Wait here. I'll see who's around," I said, kissing her cheek. I went to the kitchen, checking to see if they were still there or if they had all gone elsewhere for the evening. Ivan was in the kitchen, but he was alone. He looked at me, somewhat nervously, since I was alone.

"It's okay now. She just doesn't want to talk to everybody right now. She's waiting on the stairs for me to check to see who's around."

He chuckled. "I can give you guys privacy. I just wanted to make sure all was good."

"No, stay. I think she'll want to see you," I said, walking back to the stairs to get her. I grabbed her hand. "Ivan is the only one in the kitchen."

She sighed, relieved. "He's the only one I wanted to see right now."

I chuckled. "I literally just said that to him."

He stood up as we walked into the kitchen. He looked almost worried. She walked to him, wrapping her arms around him. He was clearly relieved. "Thank you," she said to him.

"You're not mad I told him?" he asked. That's why he was worried.

She shook her head no. "I don't think I could've told him. I'm glad you did it for me." She pulled him closer, resting her head on. his chest. She always looked so tiny next to him, but even more so when she was upset. It made her look fragile, even though I wasn't sure fragile was in her vocabulary. Ivan kissed the top of her head, a small smile on his face.

"I was right, wasn't 17" he asked her, not letting her go.

She groaned quietly. "Yes, Ivan. You were right." She poked him in the ribs, making him laugh.

She walked back to me, tucking herself into my side as I held her close to me. Ivan went to the refrigerator and pulled out two plates of food. "I had to fight them for these, but I saved you some dinner. This is all that's left. Viktor's backup meal was not needed. Sephie looked surprised that they had eaten everything else.

Seriously? I made enough for like 10 people. That's impressive."

We both laughed at her. "I don't know why this is surprising for you. You know how we like to eat," I said. I grabbed both plates to warm them.

She shook her head, chuckling to herself. "You're right. I should've known. Maybe I'm more surprised that they liked it enough to eat all of it."

"We all agreed that it was better than anything Tori ever made," Ivan said.

"Shu t up."

"It's true. Viktor said he's going to drag his feet on finding a new chef just so you'll cook more."

I walked back to her, waiting on the food to warm up still. "I don't know if that's fair. Sephie can cook when she wants to. Not because she has to." I kissed her temple, pulling her close to me again.

She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't mind. I like to cook."

"We like when you cook," Ivan said, smiling at her.

We talked a little more as she and I ate. The guys were right. It was definitely better than anything Tori had ever made us. Maybe I was okay with Viktor dragging his feet a little bit….

Sephie looked at Ivan, a serious look on her face. "You haven't slept yet, have you?"

He looked down, but shook his head no. She clicked her tongue, walking to him. She slid her arm across his shoulders, resting her chin on his good shoulder. He was so tall that she barely needed to bend over, even when he was sitting at the counter.

"Your body needs rest, Squishy. You're still trying to catch up from losing so much blood and you're just going to make it harder on yourself if you don't sleep. Your body can't do both at the same time. It can't recover and try to keep you going for days on end. You're going to crash."

He sighed. She was right, but I could clearly see the worry on his face when he thought about sleep. She leaned over and whispered something in his ear that I couldn't hear. He smiled, but once again shook his head no. She thought for a moment, her chin still resting on his shoulder. She stood up suddenly. "I have an idea. Be right back." She walked toward the guys" rooms. We heard her knock on a door, but couldn't tell whose door she knocked on. We could hear hushed voices, but that was, it. She returned with a phone in her hand. She grabbed Ivan's good arm and pulled him toward his room.

I shook my head, as I cleaned up the rest of the kitchen while I waited for her to return. While she was gone, I looked through the cabinets, hoping to find the same kind of tea she had made herself at the penthouse. I didn't think triple strength was necessary this time, but I figured it might help. As luck would have it, I found a box of the very same tea.

I had just put the tea bag in the hot water when she returned to the kitchen, without Ivan. I looked at her, my eyebrow raised, hoping she would let me in on her plan. As she got to me, I handed her the tea. "Drink this."

She took it from me, but stopped to Inspect it first. "It's not triple strength, is it?"

I laughed. "Single strength only. But I think you could use a little extra help tonight." She sipped It, smiling at me over the mug. Are you going to tell me what you just did to Ivan?"

"Ivan got stuck in his darkness much the same way 1 did on the plane, I think. Anytime I was quiet for too long, he would start fighting again. I remembered that Misha had recorded me playing at the plano gallery, so I asked if I could borrow his phone so Ivan could listert to that while he slept. That way he'd know that I was always there. I turned it on and stayed with him for a few minutes. He's so exhausted that he was asleep in like two minutes.

I walked to her, brushing a curl from her face. "That's a brilliant plan, solnishko. I was beginning to worry I would have to spend another night away from you, just so Ivan could sleep."

She cut her eyes at me as she took another sip of tea. "I'm hoping this will satisfy all parties involved.

Chapter One Hundred Forty-Seven

Adrik

Sometime in the middle of the night, Misha came into the bedroom. Sephie was asleep, across my chest as usual. Misha urgently shook me to wake me. "Boss, wake up. We need Sephie." I moved to sit up, which woke Sephie up.

"What's going on?" she asked, still half asleep.

"Sephie, we need you. Ivan…" he didn't even finish, and she was out of the bed, on her way to the door. She didn't even stop to put pants on. Good thing my shirts are so big on her. I got up to follow them.

She ran to Ivan's room. Ivan was struggling, with Viktor and Stephen trying to hold him down. He clearly wasn't completely with it, or he would've known he was fighting Viktor and Stephen and not the demons of his past.

Sephie didn't hesitate. She ran to him, getting in between Viktor and Ivan. She placed both her hands on his chest, pushing him down. "Ivan, I'm here. You're fine, Squishy." As soon as he heard her voice and felt her touch, he collapsed on the bed. She leaned over to his ear, whispering to him. He sighed and we all watched his body relax.

Viktor looked at me. "See, Boss. Never seen anything like it. We all know how difficult it is to break him out of his own head when he's like this. She does it instantly."

She looked over her shoulder at him, smiling at him, but still talking in Ivan's ear. She kept one hand on Ivan and reached over to the table next to his bed. She picked up Misha's phone, holding it in the air for him to take. "I drained your battery, Misha. I'm sorry."

He took his phone from her. "It's okay, gazelle. That must've been what started this. He was quiet until just a few minutes ago and we all heard him yell. Viktor and I rushed to check on him and Stephen heard us trying to keep him from hurting his arm again."

"Andrei's still asleep, then?" she asked.

"Yeah, pain meds knock him completely out. He's dead to the world when he takes those things," Misha said.

"Good," she said. She still had her hand on Ivan's chest as she talked to Misha. Ivan was clearly asleep still, but he reached up and grabbed her hand, holding it in his. She smiled, turning back to him, whispering something to him. He took in a deep breath, his body completely relaxed. She looked back to all of us. "You can go back to sleep now. He's fine," she said to everyone. She looked at Misha, "thank you for coming to get me."

"You're the only one that can calm him," he said. "We would still be fighting him. He's gone for hours like that before."

She had a pained look on her face. "It's not my story to tell, but he has good reason to act this way."

Misha leaned over and kissed the top of her head. "We're just glad you can save him, gazelle." He walked out of the room. Viktor walked over and kissed the top of her head as well. "Thank you, Sephle," he said as he left the room. Stephen had quietly slipped out as well.

I walked to her, not sure of what to do now, She looked at me, clearly not sure of what to do either. "I can't leave him, or he'll start struggling again."

you would've put pants on before running down

Her eyes went wide. "Shit."

I laughed at her. "I'll go get you pants. He never struggles with his demons for more than a few days after he has to go to the hospital. I can manage until he's okay."

She pulled on my arm so I would lean down to her. She pressed her lips to mine. "Thank you," she said.

I eventually managed to fall back asleep without Sephie, but it took three times as long as normal. I could always fall asleep almost immediately when she was either next to me or laying across my chest. When I woke for the second time of the morning, she was curled up next to me, her body pressed to mine.

I rolled over, putting my arm over her. She rolled over to face me, a small smile on her face.

"When did you come back?" I asked, my hands running through her hair.

"Not that long ago. Ivan woke up on his own and kicked me out. He said he promised he wasn't going to sleep again for a few hours, so that I could try to get some sleep. I tried to protest, but he might be more stubborn than me, so he won…this round," she said, grinning at me.

"How was he when he woke up?" I asked, smiling back at her.

"Still troubled. I couldn't keep him quiet for longer than a few minutes if I stopped talking to him. I haven't figured out the right thing to say to him to break him completely out of it. I'm going to try to get more details about what he's seeing, if he can even remember, later. I just have to find the right words to get him to relax for longer than a few minutes." She looked tired. She also looked just as troubled as she just described Ivan as being.

"What time is it?" I asked, still playing with her curls.

"Not even 5 yet, I don't think. He woke up a little after 4, like a complete psycho," she laughed as she snuggled closer to me, putting her leg over the top of my legs. "What time do you have to get up today?"

I groaned quietly, pulling her hips closer to mine. "I have a few meetings this afternoon, but nothing this morning."

She moaned quietly, her face just under mine, against my neck. "Mmm, so you can sleep with me for a little while?"

I kissed her forehead. "I can sleep with you for a little while, even though sleep is the last thing on my mind right now."

"Technically, I didn't say anything about the activities I had in mind before the sleeping," she said as she slid her hand into the waistband of my pants, grabbing my ass. I didn't need any further encouragement. I pulled her on top of me, her lips finding mine immediately. I loved it when she took control, but she felt almost desperate for me. I grabbed my shirt that she was wearing, ripping it open. She laughed against my lips.

"Now you hate your own shirts too? What do you have against clothing?"

"Only the clothing that's on you. And it's my shirt. I can ruin it If I want to." My hands explored her body while she continued to laugh at me. I hooked my thumbs into her panties, ripping them off too, as I smirked at her. She grabbed my hands placed them back on her hips, encouraging me to keep them roaming over her body.

your tou she said, still guiding my hands over her body

Her breath caught every time and it was almost my undoing each time.

Once she was adjusted to having me inside her, she moved her hips against me. She was still desperate for me, like she couldn't get close enough to me. Her mouth was on mine, her kiss unrelenting. Like she was asking me to match her.

It suddenly hit me. She needed assurance. She needed to know that she was the only one for me and would always be the only one for me. I let go. No more holding back. Ever again. I was always worried I would hurt her, but I think she could feel me holding back and took it for something else. She was trying to connect the last part of my soul that was holding back with the last part of hers that was scared to show itself.

I grabbed her, rougher than I'd ever grabbed her before. I expected her to tense, but she did the opposite. She completely surrendered. In one motion, I pushed her on her back and I was on top of her. My mouth was on every inch of her body, like I would never be able to get enough of her. I kept the rhythm slower, but I didn't hold back. I slammed into her roughly with each thrust. At first, she held onto my shoulders, but she let go and put her arms over her head. She was completely lost in the feeling, and she never looked more beautiful. She had her eyes closed, fully taking in every sensation I was making her feel. I couldn't stop watching her. It made me want to keep going forever.

I felt her getting closer to her orgasm. She opened her eyes, looking me in the eyes as she got closer and closer. She was driving me crazy, without even trying. My lips found hers for a moment before she threw her head back, moaning loudly as her entire body spasmed in complete pleasure. I kept going, trying to draw it out as long as possible. She was the only woman I'd been with that was able to do that. It was impressive. It was also an ego boost for me, so I did it as often as possible.

She did not disappoint. As soon as I thought she was coming down, I thrust harder into her and she would crash over the edge again. She kept going until I knew I wouldn't be able to last much longer. As soon as I felt her starting to build again, I let myself finish with her. I collapsed on top of her, completely out of breath. I felt her hands in my hair, lightly running over the back of my head and my neck.

I wrapped my arms around her, rolling onto my back so she would be lying on top of me. She was just as out of breath as I was. She quietly laid on top of me until her breathing normalized, her fingers tracing random patterns on my chest. I kissed the top of her head and heard her make the cooing noise she made when she was sleeping. I knew she was falling asleep, if not asleep. already. I lightly ran my hands over her back and through her hair. She snuggled into me, her fingers starting to lightly play her song on my heart

Chapter One Hundred Forty-Eight

Ivan

The last thing I remember was seeing tears streaming down Sephie's face as we stood by the front door of the house. I pulled her to me, trying to comfort her. Everything started to go black, but I could still hear her voice. I felt calm when I heard her voice. This has never happened before.

I knew I was hurt badly. I couldn't feel anything, but I knew enough to know that it never turned out well when my heart was racing that much or when it was that difficult to catch my breath. I knew I was going to end up in the hospital. Fuck.

I lost her voice. I started to panic. I knew what was coming. I knew what I was going to have to live through again. I'm so tired. I don't know if I have the strength to go through it again.

Just when I start to vaguely see the outline of the asshole doctor that used to torture me, I hear her voice again and he disappears. She's talking to me like I'm there with her, but I can't see anything but darkness around me. Better that than the asshole doctor.

I can feel her hands trying to move me, then she laughs. I want to laugh with her. She has no idea what her laugh does for me. Her laugh is a reminder to keep going. It seems silly. It's such a small thing, but she literally radiates joy when she smiles. Even though she's been through more than most. Her laugh is what gives me the strength to keep going. If for no other reason than to make sure she's always safe enough to keep smiling. Keep laughing.

I can hear another voice talking to her. She sounds upset now, but the other voice is one I vaguely recognize. She's worried for me. This must be worse than I thought. I can feel movement. I lose her for a minute, but then she's back, talking again. As long as I can hear her voice, she keeps the doctor away.

She's telling me they're taking me to the hospital, but she promises she won't leave me. More movement, more voices. Some familiar, some not. I can feel her next to me. She's raising her voice, she sounds frantic. Suddenly she's gone. I can't hear her. It can't feel her. She's gone.

I start to see the outline of the asshole doctor coming into view. He always looked like he enjoyed seeing me suffer. It didn't matter how long he kept me from eating, how long he left me in complete darkness, he would always look happy to see me miserable. Sick fuck. I can see him leaning down to get a closer look at me. I grab his throat, but my arm doesn't work right. That must be the one I hurt. I make a mental note to use the other one next time.

He keeps coming back. I keep trying to get to him. It never seems to matter how many times I try to kill him, he keeps coming back. I fear I'll never be rid of him. They try to tie me to the bed, but I'm stronger now. They must've made the mistake of letting me eat. It makes me stronger. It makes me dangerous. I like being dangerous. I feel myself wanting to take pleasure in watching the doctor fight for his life in my hands.

I can see the doors open and I can see the outline of a woman. I can't see the details of her face, but I can clearly see that she has red hair. The doctor yells at her, telling her to get out. I don't remember a redheaded nurse. She's not safe here. They'll experiment on her too. Redheads are special too.

She sounds angry. I recognize that anger. That doctor better cover his nose.

I feel hands on my chest. Her hands. It's her. She's here.

"Hi, Super Squishy. These fucking morons wouldn't let me come in with you, but they've learned their lesson. I'm not leaving you again. Promise. They need to work on your arm. It's broken. You've lost a lot of blood. I'm going to be here the whole time. I won't leave you."

She came back. She didn't leave me. She came back.

Everything went back to black in front of me. I could hear her voice. It made me feel calm. I hear her tell the doctor that I won't resist. She keeps talking to me, telling me that they need to fix my arm and that I need to hold still.

I can feel her hand on my chest. I reach up with the arm that apparently works and put my hand over hers. I want to make sure that she stays with me this time. I hear the doctor yell and hear a commotion.

She tells them that I've been awake the whole time and to hurry up before I lose my patience. That doctor's nose is still in danger. I squeeze her hand again, this time hoping to keep her from breaking anyone's nose.

She talks to me the whole time, keeping the doctor away. The darkness is peaceful. It's quiet here. I like it when I'm here. I've never spent this much time here before. Her voice keeps me here, Her voice brings me peace. She quiets my demons.

By the time they're done with whatever it is they're doing to my arm, the drugs they tried to sedate me with wear off enough and I can see clearly now. I'm in a room for surgery. I've been in plenty of these rooms in my life. They're all the same. They all stink. They're all cold. They all have the same fluorescent lighting overhead.

I see a nurse walk up and tell Sephie she isn't needed anymore. Just as I start to panic, Sephie tells the nurse in her very direct but funny, way that she's not leaving me. She leaned down to me, whispering, "told you I wasn't going to leave you again. These people are nuts anyway." I tried to laugh, but it came out more like a cough. I heard her laugh softly. There it is. I have to keep going.

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Chapter 149

Chapter One Hundred Forty-Nine

Ivan

They eventually take me to a room with Andrei. Everyone else is in there, as well. Sephie wouldn't let go of me. She even made me scoot over so she could share the bed with me. The nurses looked at her like she was in sane for making me move.

They don't know she's the go ddamn princess.

I'm exhausted, but I don't want to risk falling asleep. I know what happens when I go to sleep when I'm in the hospital. They're going to have to hold me down to keep me from hurting myself or someone else. It always takes all of them to hold me. They're a man down, which worries me. I don't want to put Sephie in danger from my demons.

A new nurse comes in and informs Sephie that visiting hours are almost over and she'll have to leave soon. I was dreading this moment. I knew she would have to leave again and my He ll would begin. Sephie just laughed at the nurse. She told the nurse to call the doctor and ask whether he thought it was a good idea for her to leave.

The nurse tried to intimidate Sephie into leaving. She better cover her nose, too. Sephie just stood up, which made Adrik, Viktor, Stephen, and Misha all stand up behind her. Sephie didn't even look at them, she knew they were behind her, ready for whatever she needed. She took one step toward the nurse. Crossing her arms across her chest, she said calmly, but firmly, "call Dr. Williams."

This nurse doesn't know the danger her nose is in. She's fighting a losing battle.

Misha was settled onto the small bed they brought in for him. Viktor and Stephen were trying to get some sleep, the best they could, in the chairs they were in. Adrik was too, but he was still clearly missing Sephie and worried about her. He would open his eyes every so often to check on her, then he would close his eyes again. It's probably killing him to be apart from her right now.

Sephie looked at me and whispered, "you should sleep, Squishy. I won't leave. I promise." I had a sudden feeling of panic at the thought of trying to sleep right now.

"Promise?" I asked. I would try if she was going to stay with me.

"Pinky swear, even," she said, holding her pinky up. I looked at her, having no clue what she was talking about. "Right. Let me introduce you to the pinky swear. It's the holiest of swears there is. Like completely trumps swearing on all things holy, on your mother's grave, on your life, all of it. It's the holiest of holy swears. Like the pope himself can't even make a pinky swear because he's not holy enough."

One of the best things about Sephie was her child-like innocence. She was a grown woman, tougher than any other woman I'd ever known, but she was still taking things like pinky swears seriously. Very seriously, apparently. I'd heard her and Adrik talk about It before, but never knew what they were talking about, until now. Her ability to bring light to even the worst situations was astonishing. I hoped she never stopped.

I grabbed her pinky with mine. She said, "I pinky swear that I will not leave you." I believed her. It was, after all, the holiest of holy swears.

As long as I could hear her voice, it kept the as shole doctor away. I didn't worry that I would turn into him. I didn't have to fight him or the memories that came with him. Her voice kept me in the darkness, where I wanted to be. Where I could relax. Where it was quiet,

I would occasionally lose her voice and each time, the doctor's face would start to appear in front of me. Like he was waiting for her to disappear so he could come back. Can he get to her? Is he making her go away? Each time, I start to struggle, worried that he's gotten to her too. I would hear her voice come back and the scene in front of me would disappear.

Once we got back to the house, I could tell that Sephie was exhausted. I knew she didn't get much sleep the night before because she was busy keeping my demons at bay. I assured her I would stay awake so she could get at least a few hours of sleep. "Go. Your go ddamn prince misses you."

I knew Adrik was fine with Sephie being around all of us. He trusted us and none of us would ever do anything to betray that trust. We'd been through too much together to ever jeopardize that. It was obvious, anyway, that Sephie only had eyes for Adrik. She looked at him very differently than she looked at the rest of us. She loved us, for sure, but not in the same way. Misha nailed it when he called her our little sister. That's how we all felt about her. The sometimes bratty, sometimes spoiled, but mostly adorable and always hilarious little sister. The go ddamn princess.

While everyone else was asleep, I took the opportunity to set up having Sephie's piano delivered to the penthouse. I knew we'd be away from the penthouse for a few days, so it would be the perfect time for it to be delivered, without fear of her seeing it. I spoke to Craig, telling him that something had come up and we were away for a few days, but that I would let him know when we were coming back so he could be there for the reveal. I promised he'd be there, and I was always good on my word.

With everything that happened, I hadn't had a chance to tell Adrik about the surprise. He'd be happy to know how well it was going to turn out. I'd never seen him try so hard to make someone else happy before he met Sephie. With the few girlfriends he'd had before her, it was almost like they were an afterthought to him. If they asked him for something, he'd give it to them, but otherwise, I never got the impression that he thought about them very much, if at all.

This was not the case with Sephie. He thought about her constantly. Worried about her constantly. Anytime he was away from her, he was almost grumpy until he could get back to her. And it had been like this since the first night he met her. As soon as Viktor and Andrei pulled Anthony off her in the hallway of the restaurant and Adrik picked her up that first time, he's never been able to keep his hands off her since. She can't stay away from him either. She might come to one of us for a bit, for whatever reason, but she always finds her way back to him.

I couldn't exactly explain it, but I felt a deep need to make sure that she was always able to find her way back to him.

I was left alone with my thoughts for a while before everyone woke up. Most of the time, this wasn't the ideal scenario. I preferred to keep busy. It was easier when I was busy and distracted. Not being able to do much meant I couldn't distract myself and had to sit with the memories that always come back when I'm forced to go to a hospital.

I would get angry with myself for still being haunted by it. It was over. It was done. I got myself out of there. 1 did what Thad to do. That was the one good thing that came from that situation, at least. I learned that I never needed to rely on anyone ever again. I could get myself out of any situation that I had also gotten myself into.

It had been ten years since that night when I broke out of the hospital. I didn't have much contact with any of the other boys in the program, as they would keep me away from everyone else as punishment. But I talked to one of the nurses. I think she took pity on me. She would sometimes sneak me food when they had taken it away from me because I refused to do whatever they told me. She was nicer than the other nurses, too. She always looked genuinely concerned.

The night I broke out was her night off. I wanted to make sure I didn't do anything to harm her. I knew she would try to stop me and I was determined to leave, no matter what. It wasn't much, but she was nice to me when no one else was. I didn't see to harm her.

happened to her. I al

to her. I always felt a little guilty because it

It

at I stole

doors. They would find out and think she helped me, I'm sure. I hoped she didn't get hurt. The only solace I could take was that it wasn't directly from my hands if she did get hurt

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Chapter 150

Chapter One Hundred Fifty

Ivan

Everyone eventually woke up and started to reappear in the kitchen. Nobody ate yesterday, which usually means eating twice as much as normal when we do get to eat. Sephie came downstairs and saved the day, as usual. She said to tell one of the guards. that she's extra cranky when she's hungry, so they needed to bring us Vinny's. Even the outside guards, who didn't usually interact with her, had heard stories of her temper. They all knew that she had kicked all of our as ses at some point.

A few of them had seen her sparring with us months earlier. The weather was nice, so we went outside for her training. Andrei was sparring with her, while Viktor was coaching her technique. The rest of us were watching, impressed with how quickly she could pick things up and how well she could anticipate Andrei's next move. Her observation skills were next level. It made it look like she was reading his mind, perfectly countering each one of his moves. Viktor recognized that she was holding herself back though; she was playing defense when she needed to be playing offense. He pulled her aside and said something to her, trying to get her to go harder. She needed to know what it felt like, should the situation ever arise. Andrei knew what Viktor was doing, but Andrei also knew how to get it out of her. He said something smart to her, which made her angry. I'm still not sure how he knew the exact button to push with her to get her angry, but it worked.

She kicked his a ss. To the point that Viktor stepped in and pulled her off him. It took her a few minutes to calm down after. Andrei was fine, laughing that he'd finally gotten it out of her. He really was a good trainer for her. He knew if she could learn how to channel that anger that she'd be unstoppable. That was the first time he got a true glimpse of what she was capable of.

Of course, we all knew she was incredible, but that was the first time the outside guards had seen that much of her. They were all completely shocked. And a little afraid of her from that point on.

When we stood up to walk back to the house, I felt the darkness closing in on me again. Sephie saw me sway as I tried to get my bearings and helped me stay steady on my feet. She was worried I wouldn't be able to make it back to the house, so she helped me walk. It did make it easier, not gonna lie.

She was adamant that I should sleep more when we got back to the house. Even though she kept the demons away in the hospital, I was still panicked about sleeping again. She promised she wouldn't leave me again, but I was avoiding having to go through it.

It's one of life's cr uel jokes that the more you avoid dealing with something, the more you're forced to deal with it.

Everything flooded in at once when I was alone in my room. I'd kept it all back the entire day, but I was tired. So tired. It hit me all at once.

I heard a soft knock on my door, but didn't answer. I was trying to get control of myself. I knew it would be either Sephie or Misha and I didn't really want either of them to see me like this. Before I knew it, I felt Sephie slide her arm around my shoulders. She rested her head on my shoulder and just stayed there. She didn't say anything, she just kept rubbing her hand over my back while I finally broke down.

I never really paid much attention to how much I needed that kind of physical touch. I did just fine without It, but since Sephie had come into our lives, she showed me how much I never knew I was missing It. Especially now. That empty feeling that usually came with feeling this way wasn't so bad when she was next to me.

Sephie always knew just what to say, or what not to say in this case. I didn't need to hear about how sorry through what I went through. It's not going to change anything. She knew that. She just sat with me and alone anymore. That was worth more than anything she could've said to me in that moment.

She was like an anchor in the middle of the storm. It didn't matter how bad it got, how much I got tossed around, I knew she would be there. Holding onto me, keeping me from getting lost in my dark sea.

I've spent so much time with my demons that I'm really not scared of them anymore. She was right. If you stop fighting them, they lose their power over you. But I'm still afraid I'm going to get lost and not be able to find my way back when I'm in my own darkness. It's so peaceful. So quiet. I can feel myself not wanting to leave. I know what happens if I decide to stay there.

She gives me a reason to come back.

Chapter One Hundred Fifty-One

Sephie

It felt like I had just gotten to sleep when I felt Adrik stir underneath me, I was still completely on top of him. He probably needed to get up, but I really didn't want to move. I felt like I could sleep the rest of the day and still be tired. I groaned as I rolled off him onto my back, lying next to him. I heard him laugh quietly as he rolled over with me. I felt his fingers lightly on my face, tracing down my neck. I couldn't help but smile at his touch.

"Good morning, solnishko," he said as he left a trail of kisses where his finger had just traced.

I finally opened my eyes, finding his smiling eyes watching me fight having to wake up. I ran my hand through his messy hair. I adored the way he looked at me, but after everything that had happened last night, I found myself relieved that he was still looking at me with such love in his eyes. I'd been terrified that finding out I couldn't give him children was going to make him leave. It still worried me, because people change their minds all the time, but for now, he assured me he wasn't going anywhere. And I finally felt like he proved it once I came back to bed this morning. He'd been holding back, but he finally let go this morning. I finally felt like his words matched his actions. It was everything I needed.

I smiled at him. "You stopped holding back," I said, my fingers running through his facial hair.

"I was worried I was going to hurt you, physically. But I think I ended up hurting you emotionally by holding back instead. I know you felt it. You feel everything, you notice everything, my little secret weapon," he said, grinning at me.

I looked at him smiling at me, his hands on me, his body above mine, and in that moment, I couldn't imagine ever being without him. There was still that small part of me that was worried I would lose him at some point, but with each day, that part got smaller. After last night, I knew he loved me just as much as I loved him. With everything he had. Always and forever.

I pulled him down to me, wrapping my arms around his neck. He laid his head on my chest, my fingers running through his hair. I felt him take a deep breath in. I said quietly, "It was everything I needed."

He propped himself back on his elbow, looking into my eyes. I knew he was still worried that I was okay after last night. He looked as sincere as I'd ever seen him when he said, "I love you, Sephie. I will always love you and I will always want you by my side. Forever."

I could feel the tears welling in my eyes, but this time, they were happy tears. I smiled at him, putting my hands on either side of his face, pulling him to me and pressing my lips to his. "I love you, Adrik. More than anything."

When we came downstairs, it was approaching noon. Everyone but Andrei was in the kitchen, either making food or finishing up what they had just eaten, Viktor looked up from washing a plate in the sink. "Good morning, sestrichka. Are you hungry? There's still some back-up dinner left from last night, although it's not as good as what you made."

I laughed at him. "I still can't believe you guys ate all of It. I thought I made too much."

He laughed. "We were hungry, but it was also very good. You can cook for us anytime,; he said, winking.

"Maybe I will. It keeps me occupied and out of trouble, which I clearly need help with." I sat down next to Ivan at the counter He cut his eyes over to me, but said nothing. "Where's Andrel? Is he still sleeping?" I asked, no one in particular

ated the question, he walked into the kitchen. "You rang spider monkey?" He grinned

ntil rioan lookood

probably the most like me in his love for, well, fuckery. I smiled at him, looking forward to finding out what he was thinking.

Adrik took Viktor and Stephen with him again for his few meetings that he had that afternoon. He assured me he wouldn't be gone long, I still couldn't help but worry about him while he was gone, but I knew he would be safe with Viktor and Stephen.

Misha caught me alone after they had left. Andrei had gone to take a shower and Ivan had taken a phone call. "I have an idea, gazelle. I think it could work, but I need your help."

I'

"An idea for what?" I asked. I couldn't help but smile at him. He was handsome, just like the others, but he had a boyish look that made him extra adorable anytime he was excited about something. His green eyes would always get an extra spark to them anytime he was being devious. It was contagious.

"How to help Ivan sleep through the night. I didn't think about the battery running out last night, but even still, I only got a few hours of you playing at the gallery, so it would've stopped eventually anyway. But, and this is where you come in, I have an extra phone that we can use to record as much of you playing as possible. That way, he can sleep for longer without you having to be there to keep him calm. We just plug in the phone and I can create a playlist that will play continuously for him. It worked until the phone died last night."

"I like this plan. I approve this plan. I'm still trying to figure out what I need to say to him that will break him out of his loop for good. Adrik was eventually able to break me out of mine, but I can't seem to find the right words to say to Ivan to break him out." I looked down at the counter, lost in thought for moment, trying to figure out the right words to say to him.

"You always know the right things to say to us, gazelle. You'll figure it out. But this will take some of the pressure off, in the meantime," he grinned at me as I looked up at him.

"You're my favorite, my adorable Russian guardian. Don't tell the others."

Chapter One Hundred Fifty-Two

Sephie

Misha disappeared for a bit, keeping Andrei busy for me as well, so that I could have a little time with Ivan. I was hoping he would want to talk about what he sees when he's stuck in his memories. I was still trying to figure out the right thing to say to him to break him out of the loop, so he could sleep peacefully.

Ivan walked in from the back patio. I was the only one on the couches, so he stretched out next to me. "You still look tired," he said. He looked apologetic.

"You do too, Squishy. You're also the one that needs the sleep more than I do at this moment, too."

He thought for a moment, staring at the ceiling. He sighed. "I'll be okay. I can usually get a handle on it after a couple of days."

"Do you want to tell me what you see when it happens? I'm still trying to figure out the right thing to say to you that will break you out of it completely, like Adrik did for me. I can keep you quiet for a while, but I can't seem to break you out of it completely. You're not helping my self-esteem issues, for the record." I gave him a half-smile, so he would know I was mostly joking. It really was bothering me that I couldn't seem to break him out of the prison of his mind completely.

He was quiet for a few minutes. He looked at me. "Where's Misha and Andrei?"

"They went outside to talk to the guards."

He nodded. "Before you, I would see the doctor that used to torture me. It's always him that I'm fighting. It doesn't matter who's actually in front of me, I can only see that as shole doctor and hear his voice in my head. That's why it takes all of them to hold me down. I'm determined to ki ll him each time. But he always comes back, no matter what I do. He always comes back."

I gave him a knowing look. My uncle had been living in my head for years now.

"But when you talk to me, he disappears. I can hear your voice every time and everything fades to black. I can't see anything, but I can clearly hear your voice. If your voice disappears, the doctor comes back."

I shivered. I remembered the void I was in. "Can you see your own body, but nothing else? Like you're swimming in the blackness?"

He nodded, somewhat surprised. "It happened to you loo?"

"Adrik's voice pulled me there, out of the loop from the ball. Or that night…with my uncle. I could hear my uncle's voice there for a while, until I finally let myself remember everything from that night." I looked at him, apprehensively.

"He told me what you did that night, Sephle." He smiled. "I told him that I had thought your beast mode was activated when you shot that guy in the face, but it turns out your beast mode has always been activated." He winked at me.

I gave him a small smile. "I still don't feel any remorse over it. I think I might be a monster for it, but I feel nothing when I think about what I did."

not a monster, princess. You saved yourself. You proved to yourself that you can get yourself out of any

Not everyone would've made it out of that house alive that night." He sat up and

to come out of me breaking out of the facility was in. 1 proved to myse

I looked at him, laughing. "Sériously. Death is obsessed with us. Like, give it a rest, bro. I'm embarrassed for you."

He laughed. He pulled me toward him and hugged me. "You have no idea what your laugh does for me, princess."

I raised my eyebrow. "Please tell me it's not like fingernails on a chalk board for you."

He laughed again. "No, the opposite, really. I think part of the reason that it takes me days to get over a trip to the doctor is that I inevitably end up in the darkness. I like it there, Sephie. It's quiet. It's calm. I find myself wanting to stay there." He paused, inhaling deeply. "I'm tired of fighting sometimes. I know if I decide to stay, there's no coming back. Your laugh gives me a reason to come back. You radiate joy when you laugh and smile. It's a reminder that I can keep going."

I didn't even try to hold back the tears that were streaming down my face at his words. I curled up next to him, pulling his good arm around my shoulders, my head on his shoulder. "Ivan, I understand. I understand the tired. I understand not wanting to come back. But I need you. If you ever can't find a reason to come back for yourself, then know that I need you here. I will always need you here."

Fle didn't say anything, but I felt him lean down and kiss the top of my head as he held me a little tighter. We sat in silence for a few minutes. I remembered Misha's plan to help him get some sleep without needing me to babysit him. "What about last night when you were listening to me playing at the gallery? What happened then?"

"It was basically the same as hearing your voice. As long as I could hear you playing, I stayed in the darkness. It was nice, actually. But when the music stopped, the doctor came back, same as when I lose your voice."

'I

"So, you think if we made a longer recording or like a playlist of nie playing, you could sleep for longer?"

"I don't see why not. It worked last night until the phone died."

"Yeah, that was my bad. I don't know why I didn't think about plugging the st upid phone in." I said.

He chuckled. "You're sleep-deprived because you've been trying to take care of me, princess. It was still a good idea."

"I will happily take care of you, if it means you heal faster. Your one-armed hugs su ck," I said, poking him in the ribs. "Do you know what happened to the facility? Like, is it still there?"

"I don't know. I tried to investigate it a few years ago, but I kept running into dead ends. I think it was a top-secret level operation, so there's not much information on it available. There were a lot of boys there still when I broke out. I sometimes wonder what happened to them. There was one nurse that I would talk to. I sometimes wonder what happened to her too."

"Can you remember her name?"

"I don't need to. I stale her key card to get out. I still have it," he said:

"Have you tried looking her up?"

He shook his head no. "I thought about it, but I was too scared. She was the only one that was ever nice to me. I don't know if I could handle knowing that something happened to her because I took advantage of her niceness and stole her card to get out."

"That's fair. But don't forget that she was choosing to work there. Day after day, knowing what was happening there. She's your Max. You're ignoring her red flags because she was all you had at the time."

He was quiet for a moment, then pulled me closer to him. He kissed the top of my head again. "Sometimes I ha te it when you use my advice on me. I ha te it even more that you're right."

I laughed. "It's good advice. Fcan't keep it all to myself."

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Chapter 153

Chapter One Hundred Fifty-Three

Sophie

Once Misha and Andrei came back, I spent a little time playing the plane, so Misha could add to the recordings he already had. 1 had a new melody in my head for a new song that I thought of while staying awake for Ivan. I started to play with it and a new song started to form. I wasn't sine il I got it from my dad, since he was the one that planted the melody of my song into my head and then let me tunish it. That was how I usually wrote songs. I would just think of the melody and the more I played with it, the more the song would form around it. My dad has probably been planting melodies in my head my whole life without me knowing.

Once I was done, Misha said, "that's not one you've played before, is it?"

1 shook my head no. "I just thought of that one the other night. It'll change a few more times before I figure it out."

"You just made all of that up? Right now?" I nodded, laughing at his expression. "That's amazing. It sounds like a finished song."

"Only because you can't hear it in my head. It's not finished yet."

"I won't tell if you don't tell. No one will ever know."

We walked back through the kitchen to find van passed out on the couch. He finally gave up and fell asleep. I looked quickly to Misha, who ran to his room to get a charger. He rushed back as quietly as he could, plugging the phone in close to Ivan. He turned it on and turned the volume up loud enough that Ivan could hear it.

He pulled me back toward the kitchen, saying quietly. "It's not set up to play on repeat yet. I have to mess with it and the videos I took at the gallery to make one long recording, but if we stay close, I can just start it over when it reaches the end."

I looked at the time. "I think it's perfect. I was going to start on dinner right about now anyway, so it works out. You can help me. Whether you want to or not." I grinned at him.

"Are you kidding? I will gladly help you. My stomach was so lucking happy last night. I'll do whatever you want. What are you going to make this time?"

"I was thinking of making ravioli. It's one of my favorite recipes that Max's grandmother taught me. I haven't made it in a while."

He just stared at me for a long moment. "I love you so much right now," he said as his broad smile stretched across his face.

I couldn't help but smile back at him. "I know," I said as I winked at him.

I was still finishing up dinner with Misha when Adrik, Viktor, and Stephen got home. Misha and I were busy talking and laughing quietly as I ordered him around the kitchen. Ivan was still passed out on the couch. Misha had it timed perfectly. He would run in and restart the recording just as it finished each time.

He had just walked back in the kitchen and I said, "we're going to have to wake him eventually so that you can stop having to restart the recording and make it longer for him. But so far, it's working smashingly well."

Adrik, Viktor, and Stephen walked into the kitchen. I smiled at them, putting my finger up to my lips to ntake sure they stayed quiet. They walked over to the counter before talki

"Ivan is finally asleep on the couch. I don't want to wake him up just yet. He needs it," I said.

Adrik walked to my side, his arm sliding around my waist. "So, heating you play works just as well as you talking to him?" He pressed his lips to mine when I looked up at him to answer his question. I smiled against his lips as I nodded my head.

"Misha got more recordings today and he's going to put them all together so it will play continuously for him. Then we just have to remember to plug in the phone, so he and Viktor don't need to wake up in a panic again."

Viktor sighed. "I'd prefer to not have to fight him in the middle of the night, but I'll do it if necessary. It usually takes all of us to hold him down. He's a beast on a good day, but when he's like that, he's out for blood. It's hard not to take it personal sometimes."

"He doesn't see you guys when he's like that. It doesn't matter who is in front of him, he can only see his memories. He's not fighting you guys. He's fighting his past," I said, looking at him sympathetically. The fallout of trauma. It affected everyone.

"But he sees you when he's like that," Viktor said, somewhat perplexed.

I thought for a moment. I didn't want to say too much, because I know Ivan didn't want them to know and I didn't have the best track record lately with keeping my mo uth sh ut. Adrik still had his arm around me, I fell him run his hand up my back. He knew I was trying to find the words.

"I think it's because he and I go to the same place. What he described to me today was exactly the same as what I experienced on the plane and when we were at the ranch." I looked at Adrik, suddenly curious as to how he could pull me into the darkness.

"Like I said before, his demons recognize mine." I shrugged my shoulders, not really knowing how else I could explain it.

"Well, whatever it is, I've still never seen anything like it. I've known Ivan for over ten years now and he's never snapped out of it as quickly as he has with you. I'm glad. For him. And maybe a little bit for me, too, because I don't have to fight him," he said as he grinned.

"I wouldn't want to fight him, that's for sure," I said, as I winked at him.

"What's for dinner, sestrichka? It smells amazing," he said, rubbing his stomach.

Misha said, "she made mushroom ravioli. And bread. Bro. She made bread. And she made the ravioli from scratch. Like everything you're about to put in your mo uth was made by her."

"To be fair, the chicken was not made by me. I just cooked it. And also, Misha helped with everything. He's quite the sous chef." I said smiling at him.

Ivan walked into the kitchen, looking better than he had earlier. He still looked tired, but nowhere near as tired as he did earlier-in the day, "Princess, that smells like it's going to make my stomach happier than it was last night, which is saying a lot."

I couldn't help but smile at him. "Squishy, you look better. You slept okay? It worked?"

He nodded, "Was that one a new one?"

Misha answered for me. "Can you believe she just like sat down and played that for the first time today? She was like I have this melody in my head. Banı. Here's a song. The End."

I laughed. "It's not finished yet. It'll sound better when it's finished."

Ivan said, "I like It. It might be my favorite one so far."

As I stood in the kitchen, looking at Ivan tell me he liked that song, I knew without a doubt that my dad had put that melody in my head specifically for Ivan. I thanked him silently.

"Oh, Boss. I have news," Ivan said as he indicated for Adrik to allow him to the next room. Adrik kissed my temple and whispered, "be right back, love," as he walked into the next room with Ivan.

"Viktor, would you mind seeing if Andrei is awake yet? He told us to make sure and wake him up for dinner."

"If I say no, can I get his portion?" he asked, his eyebrow raised like he was legitimately considering saying no.

"Do you want me to smack you with this wooden spoon? Because I'll do it," I said, pointing at him with the spoon.

He laughed loudly, walking out of the kitchen. Adrik and Ivan walked back into the kitchen, both looking like they were trying to keep it together. That was serious news. Adrik walked back to me, pulling me to him. He wrapped his arms around me tightly, his face in my hair, inhaling deeply. "I missed you, solnishko." I stepped back, looking at him, but saw only happiness in his eyes. I stood on my toes and kissed him gently. "I missed you more," I said smiling against his lips.

Chapter One Hundred Fifty-Four

Sephie

I made sure to make even more food this time, thinking there would be leftovers they could eat the next day, Wrong. They just ate more.

"I'm going to have to start rationing you guys. Or you're all going to have to start running with me." I said, as they all went back for seconds and thirds,

Misha laughed. "This kind of delicious death will be worth it." They all agreed with him.

"I ha te running, but I'll do it if it means I can eat more of this, Stephen said.

"It's not so bad, once you get used to it," Misha said.

"Just never think you can run faster than her and you'll be fine," Adrik sard, winking at me.

"I haven't sup in so long, you have a good shot at beating me now." I grinned at him.

We stayed in the kitchen, talking, well after all the food was gone for a second day in a row.

"Have Dariu and Massimo made it to meet with Trinu yet?" Ivan asked

Viktor nodded. "Armando is in contact with some of Trine's people. They confirmed that Dario and Massimo landed this morning. Trine is making then wait, just like he did with Lorenzo and Anthony," he said, laughing.

"I like his style," I laughed.

Adrik looked at me thoughtfully. "I think it would be a good idea for you to meet him, solnishko. Mando and I were talking about it. I don't want to count on him without you meeting him first."

I smiled to myself at how reliant he had become on my observation skills. He was just as good as I was, to be fair, but I kind of loved how he included me in his business. "How funny would it be for him to come here to meet with you while the other bosses are waiting on him in Colombia?" I said, mostly joking at the absurdity of it,

Adrik looked at me, then looked to Ivan, then to Viktor. "That's not a bad plan, solnishko. I didn't want you to go down there while they were still there. It appears he's going to keep them there forever because he's having such a good time making them wait."

Viktor asked, "how much time do you need to figure out whether he can be trusted, Sephie?"

I thought for a moment. "Not long, unless he's a complete psycho like Massimo. He took me longer. Everyone else I've been able to figure out almost immediately."

Viktor looked to Adrik. "We could meet him in between here and there. It would likely get back to the other bosses if he cante all the way here, but we can meet him halfway without them knowing. We can get in and out of your usual meeting spot with Trino quickly. It'll give Sephle enough time to meet him and he can get back before the other bosses catch on that he's meeting with you."

Adrik thought for a few moments. "It might be nice to get away for a couple of days. We can take Mando and Glana as well. want Sephie to see everyone together. She'll be able to tell me if anyone is lying. I trust Mando. I mostly trust Glana, but I don't know her well. And I trust Trino so far, but I want Sephie to confirm that." He looked to Misha, raising an eyebrow, silently asking for his thoughts on this plan.

Misha thought for a few minutes. We could see him working through various scenarios in his head, but he ultimately gave the green light. Adrik then looked to Andici and Ivan. "How long before you two are up for travel?"

Andrei spoke first. "I'm good, Boss. Whatever you need. I should be able to use it almost fully in the next couple of days." Adrik nodded, then looked to Ivan, who was quiet for a moment. He looked conflicted.

"Ivan's wound is more serious than Bubba's. He won't be back to normal as quickly, but he's still more lethal with one arm than most people are with two, so there's that," I said, winking at him:

"I'll be okay to travel, Boss. She's right. I won't have lull use of my arm for a while, but I'm good. There's no way I'm not going," he said, looking right at me. I couldn't help but smile at liim. He's taking his new role very seriously.

Adrik was quiet, thinking about this plan. "I'll speak with Mando and Trino tomorrow. Trino still hasn't given Lorenzo and Anthony an answer on their proposed deal," He laughed. "He's really enjoying stringing them along. This will give him reason to make them wait even longer, so I can't see him not agreeing to meet with us,"

Finally, he looked to me. "Are you up to a quick trip to ineet him?"

I nodded my head. "I'm curious to meet him. Especially after hearing how he's been treating the other bosses. Just promise me that you won't let Giann go shopping at any point while we're gone."

They all laughed. "Deal," Adrik said, smiling at me.

Misha had time after dinner to splice together the videos so they would play continuously for at least 8 hours. "It should restart. when it gets to the end, but I haven't tested that out yet, so I don't know for sure if that will work."

I looked to Ivan. "You were good on the couch earlier, right?" I was worried about leaving him alone again overnight. I didn't want him to have to go through it again, it we could avoid it. If I needed to sacrifice another night of sleep, I would gladly do it to keep him from having to relive it.

"Yeah, it worked well. Just like it did last night, only it was still playing when I woke up."

I looked to Misha again. "Okay, we can try it again, but if you hear anything, you come get me right away again. Understood?"

Misha nodded, handing Ivan the phone. "It's all ready to go. You just have to plug it in and hit play."

"Thanks, kid," Ivan said. He put his good hand on Misha's shoulder. Misha just nodded and left for his room.

1 looked to Ivan. "Want me to make sure you fall asleep okay before leaving?" I felt silly asking a grown ass man if he wanted me luck him in, but I wanted to make sure he was okay.

He smiled at me, pulling me to him and hugging me. "I'll be okay, princess. Thank you. For everything."

"You know I love you, Squishy. I just want to make sure you're good, I need you around and what not," I said, grinning at him.

"And also, your one-armed hugs still suck."

"Technically, I can give you a normal hug. It's not like I'd feel the difference," he laughed.

"Touché, But then I'd have to yell at you for using your bad arm and It would just get ugly."

He covered his nose and leaned away from me. I couldn't help but tough at him. He was so different from when I first met him, and I adored this Ivan. He pulled me back to him, giving me another one-armed hug and kissing the top of my head. "I'll see you in the morning, princess."

"You know where to find me if you need anything." I looked at him seriously. He chuckled, nodding his head as he walked toward his room

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Chapter 155

Chapter One Hundred Fifty-Five

Sephie

I walked back to the kitchen to find Adrik waiting for me with another cup of tea. I smiled at him, taking the cup from him.

“Honestly, I’m so tired I don’t think I even need this, but thank you. You’re so good to me.” I kissed his cheek, turning so I could lean my back against him while he wrapped his arms around me from behind so I could still sip the tea while in his arms. He moved my hair oft my neck, lightly brushing his stubble against my neck as he gently kissed my neck. I closed my eyes, enjoying his touch.

“Are you still happy here, solnishko? You don’t mind staying here another day or two until Ivan and Andrei are better?” he asked.

“Of course not. Why? Are you planning on not coming back one night?” I asked, looking at him sideways.

He laughed. “Why would I ever want to torture myself like that? I just want to make sure you’re not missing seeing other people.”

“You’re very sweet to think about that. With everything that’s happened, I kind of don’t want to see other people right now. Other people are different from you and the guys,” I said, taking another sip of tea.

He turned me around to face him, a curious look on his face. “What do you mean?”

I sighed. “I’m not entirely sure how to explain it. I didn’t even realize it was happening until I spent more time with you and the guys. Other people, other than you guys, take from me without ever giving anything in return. Lake Giana, for example. That girl is so insecure with herself that she’s latched onto me anytime she’s around me. Thankfully, she also latched onto Ms. Jackson so I can have a break. I mean, I’m not mad at her for it, but it’s exhausting to be around for very long. Max is that way, too. I just never realized it until I was apart from him for a while. Ils of talking about them, lots of me solving their problems, lots of me giving them support. Rarely the other way around. Normally, it doesn’t bother me, but with everything that’s happened the past couple of days, all the extra I have to give is reserved for Tyan and to a lesser extent, Andrei. So, now that I’ve gone into way more detail than you were expecting. I’m perfectly happy hiding here for a few more days.” I finished my cup of tea and set it on the counter. Adrik looked at me, thoughtfully. He grabbed my hand, pulling me toward the stairs. I was happy to go to bed, hopeful I would get to sleep through the night tonight. I was already feeling the effects of the tea.

“I can leave Mando and Giana here when we go meet Trino,” he said, as we walked up the stairs.

“No, it’s okay. I think you’re right. I need to see him with Trino as well. I didn’t say all that to mean that I don’t want to be around Giana ever again. She’s a nice girl. I’m just happy to have a break right now to get past the last couple of days.”

As we walked into the bedroom, he turned and pulled me to him, his hands finding their way under my shirt. “I’ll make plans for the middle of next week then. You can have the rest of the week and weekend here. That’ll give Andrei and Ivan more time too.”

I smiled at him. “Deal. Although I think Andrel won’t need that much time. He’s healing much faster than Ivan is. He looked much better today. But I think if Ivan can sleep tonight, he’ll start to feel better too,”

“You’ll feel better if you can sleep tonight as well, my love,” he kissed my forehead as he pulled my shirt over my head and threw it on the floor. He untucked his shirt, unbuttoning it, and sliding it off. He held it up behind me so I could slide my arms In the sleeves, then he buttoned it up. The sleeves were always too long, so he took the time to roll each one up, before moving to my jeans.

“We should change your bandage before we go to bed. I think we were supposed to do that last night and I forgot,” he said.

“Clearly, I did ton. It hasn’t bothered me much lately, though. Maybe I can leave the bandage off overnight. I’m tired of bandages. I’m going to have a square scar from the stupid adhesive on the bandages.”

He clicked his tongue. “I’m surry, solnishka. I know it’s irritating. Cone, we’ll look at it.” He bent down and picked me up. carrying me to the bathroom. He set me down on the counter. I pulled his shirt up far enough that he could peel the bandage off. I flinched. This was always the worst part now. My skin was so sensitive where the adhesive stuck to it. Adrik always looked so apologetic when he took the bandage off.

He inspected my shrinking wound. “It’s much smaller now. Do you want to try to leave the bandage off overnight?”

I nodded. “Yes, please. If no other reason than to give my skin a break from the world’s strongest adhesive.”

He chuckled. “We’ll leave it off, then. But tell me if it starts to bolher you. I’ll repack it.”

“I’m secretly hoping that nothing will bother me tonight,” I said, putting my hands on his shoulders. I wrapped my legs around him, pulling him closer to me.

“Nothing? Nothing at all?” he asked, a devilish grin on his face.

I ran my hands down his chest and his stomach. “Present company excluded, of course,” I said as I unbuckled his belt. He smiled, his lips immediately finding mine.

I woke the next morning to Adrik’s warm hands on my lack. His shirt did not stay on me for very long last night. As long as I could lay across his chest while I slept, I never seemed to get cold. It never seemed to matter how we fell asleep, I inevitably ended up laying across lus chest. He never seemed to mind, but I sometimes felt guilty for keeping hum hasically trapped underneath me. He felt me begin to stir and his hand ran up to the back of my neck. This was a new spot that he found rather recently. I made the mistake of telling him that it turned me on when he would leave his hand there, partially in my hair, partially on my neck. Of course, that made him want to do it more.

I secretly loved it. I moaned softly, not wanting him to stop. Not wanting to have to wake up yet.

“Good morning, solnishko,” he said. I could hear him sinuling without having to look at him.

I rested my chin on his chest, smiling back at him. “You look a little more rested this morning,” he said as he pushed a lew curls back from my face.

“I’m guessing that Misha’s brilliant plan worked the entire night. Either that, or Ivan has been awake for hours and will be exhausted when we go downstairs.”

“Nobody came to get you, so let’s hope that the plan worked.” 1 rolled off him, stretching before I got up. “How does your hip feel this morning after leaving the bandage off overnight?”

I sat up enough that I could look at the almost-gone hole in my hip. It had dried and formed a scab overnight. It also didn’t hurt any at all. “I think it’s fine. I want to leave the bandage aff today. See what happens.”

He rolled on top of me, to get a closer look at it. He kissed my hip, just above the shrinking wound. “It does look better. As long as it doesn’t hurt you again, maybe you can leave the bandage off for a while.”

“One less thing to worry about It fine by me,” I said, grinning at him.

He frowned briefly, then kissed me. He looked at me thoughtfully, his fingers running lightly through my hair. “I promise things will get better soon. You won’t have to worry about anything ever again.”

I smiled at him. “As long as I have you, I can handle anything.” I paused, then added, “okay, maybe the guys too. They can stick around too.”

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Chapter 156

Chapter One Hundred Fifty-Six

Sephie

Both Ivan and Andrei made considerable progress the rest of the week and chiring the weekend. Amtrei stopped wearing his sling a few days after coming home from the hospital. He said being able to move his arm and shoulder felt better than keeping it still all day long. I would still yell at him for trying to use it too much too soon, but he really was healing remarkably fast.

Ivan was slightly slower, but his wound was also considerably worse. He was still heavily bandaged because of the extensive stitches. Before he left the hospital, they told him to have his bandage changed and the stitches checked over the weekend. Clearly, that was going to be an issue for him.

“I don’t know, Ivan. I can change your bandage, but I’m a little paranoid about checking your stitches. You had so much damage. What if I miss something important?” I asked, trying to figure out if he could handle seeing a doctor one more time,

He laughed. “Says the girl that misses nothing.” I squinted my eyes at him. “You’ll be able to tell if there’s something going on in there that needs to be looked at. If it looks bad, I’ll go to a doctor,” he said, reluctantly. He paused, then added, “as long as you go with me.”

Smiling, I rested my chin on his good shoulder. “I’ll always go with you, Ivan He rested his head gently on mine. “Do we have everything we need to wrap you back up again? I don’t think you need to go without a bandage and sling like Bubba quite yet.”

He nodded. “Viktor made sure to pick up everything. He knew there was a very slim chance I would go back to see the doctor, like instructed.”

I grinned. Viktor was like the father of the group. He quietly went about making sure everyone had everything they needed. He oversaw all the security, kept Adrik’s schedule, and was even helping Armando create his own security force. Papa Bear.

Ivan’s stitches looked quite good once I got his bandage removed. “Dr. Williams did a much better job on your arm than I did on your back,” I said, laughing as I inspected his arm.

“Your stitches kept me from having to go to the hospital, so I’d say they were infinitely better as far as I’m concerned,” he said, cutting his eyes at me.

“Squishy logic for the win, ladies and gentlemen.” I sighed, “I think you’re going to live, Super Squish. Everything looks good from what I can tell. I would tell you to let me know if anything starts to hurt, but I don’t think that would do any good.”

“I can feel it when it starts to heal. It itches,” he said.

“Really? That’s surprising. So, it’s just the pain that you don’t feel? Like you can feel everything else?” I asked, curious how it worked.

He nodded his head. “Some pain I can feel. Like when you poke me in the ribs. I feel that. Severe pain, I don’t feel. Everything else, I can feel. Pleasure I can feel”

“I was Loday years old when I learned that I was secretly curious about that,” I said, grinning at him. “Now I know,” I said, working on bandaging his arm again.

He looked around, making sure we were alone. “Redheads are similar, you know. You guys have an insanely high pain tolerance compared to other people. The few redheaded boys I knew in the program were put through he ll to see how much they could handle. It was almost as much as me. They had weird reactions to drugs too. One boy had it the worst. The pain meds didn’t work on him at all. Like ine, but he could feel all the pain. I really felt bad for that aid.”

My heart hurt for that poor child, “I didn’t know redheads were that different. I’ve only had the one surgery and I don’t remember much about it. They said I was out for a long time, but I don’t remember anything else about it. I wasn’t in the best state of mind when I woke up, so I think 1 blocked it out.”

“Understandable. They probably had to give you more drugs than normal to keep you under. That’s what would happen to the boys in the program. They would take at least double the amount of drugs to knock them out. It would always take them twice as long to wake up too.”

I shook my head. “Those poor kids.” I finished his bandage in silence, thinking about everything he had to endure in his early life, but also how I found myself silently grateful for it, as it led him to this moment. I smiled, remembering Adrik had said basically the same thing to me on the balcony so many months ago, after learning about my scars. “Ivan, I don’t think anything I can say to you about your past will make it any easier to deal with, but I’m grateful that the path you were forced to walk led you here. I can’t imagine my life without you in it.”

He looked stunned. I just smiled at him while I put away the bandage supplies, I went to throw away the old bandage. When I came back, he just pulled me to him, hugging me tightly. I rested my head against his chest, hugging him back just as tightly. Knowing he would always keep me safe.

We were finishing tip dinner on Sunday night. Adrik looked to Ivan, raising his eyebrow, asking a silent question. Ivan nodded his head, a small smile on his face. I looked to Adrik, who also had a smile on his face. “I think we should go back to the penthouse until we leave to meet Trino,” he said, holding my gaze. There was something in his tone that told me it had already been decided, but there was clearly another reason he wanted to go back to the penthouse before we left. We’d spent almost the entire week at the house, so I was happy to go back to the penthouse, even though I was enjoying the routine we’d all settled into at the house. I was enjoying cooking dinner for everyone each night.

Stephen told me that Viktor hadn’t even put the word out that we needed a chef yet. Clearly, they were also enjoying my cooking.

“Why do I feel like the decision has already been made on this?” I asked, smiling at Adrik, He gave me his boyish grin that told me there was definitely more to going back to the penthouse. I couldn’t help but laugh at him.

Viktor asked, “what do we have to do to get you to cook at the penthouse too?” He leaned back in his chair, pulling his shirt up and patting his stomach. He’d pushed it out to make himself look like he had a belly. I laughed at him, knowing he had a six-pack like all of them.

“You don’t have to do anything, Viktor. I like it. Wait until it gets colder and I don’t want to go outside. I’ll start baking. Your stomach might actually look like that come spring.”

“Worth it,” he said, smiling broadly at me

Chapter One Hundred Fifty-Seven

Sephic

We spent the morning at the house, like usual. When it was time for Adrik to leave for work, we all left. All of them had been practically giddy all morning long, like they had a secret that I wasn't in on. I was hoping by their smiles that whatever it was, it was going to be good.

On the elevator up, I finally asked, "are you guys going to let me in on the secret you're all clearly very happy about?"

Adrik kissed my temple. He looked at his watch, then back to me. "In approximately 15 minutes, you'll know everything."

Instead of going to the penthouse, we went to his office first. Except Ivan. Ivan stayed on the elevator, waving bye to me as I looked at him, confused, while the doors closed.

"Where's he going?" I asked. Now I was getting even more curious, They all looked at me, devious grins on their faces, but no one answered my question. 1 felt myself starting to get slightly nervous about what they were planning.

It didn't seem like we were in the office for more than 5 minutes and Viktor's phone rang. He answered it, listened, then hung up. He looked to Adrik, "ready, Boss." Viktor looked to me, his broad smile stretching across his face.

Adrik grabbed my hand, leading me back to the elevator. Everyone followed us. No one said a word. They just had their shit-eating grins on their faces. Once in the elevator again, Adrik pulled me to him. I tucked myself into his side, looking at him, silently questioning what was going on. He just pushed the curts hick from my face. "You'll see," he said, that smile still on his face.

Once we arrived at the top floor, I saw Ivan as the doors opened. He was grinning like a moron just like the rest of them.

"Okay, you guys are starting to creep me out. For real," I said, starting to get frustrated they wouldn't say anything. They all laughed.

Adrik pulled me with him, toward the door to the penthouse. He opened the door, motioning for me to go first. "There's someone who has something for you," he said.

I looked at him, still not sure what exactly they were planning. I walked through the door, half expecting them all to wait outside, but they all silently followed me in the penthouse.

"Craig? What are you doing here?" I asked, as I walked inside.

He walked to me, hugging me. "Sephie. I've been waiting for this moment for almost ten years." He had tears in his eyes as he stepped back from me. I looked at him, still puzzled. He grabbed my hand and led me further into the penthouse. All the guys followed.

On the other side of the couches, I saw it. A piano. No. No, it can't be. I stopped, looking at Craig In complete disbelief.

He smiled at me, knowing I knew exactly who's piano that was. "It really is, Sephie. I've been saving It, hoping this day would come." I couldn't speak, I just looked at him, completely shocked. He continued, "Sephie, your mother came to me years before her accident and asked me to promise her that I would find a way to keep that piano with you in the event that anything ever happened to her. I knew you didn't have room for it in your apartment, so I've been keeping it." He looked around the penthouse, Taughing quietly. "You definitely have room now."

I couldn't help but laugh. I didn't have words. 1 hugged him tightly, not even caring about the tears I knew were streaming down my face. He whispered, "go. It's missed you as much as you've missed it." He gently pushed me toward the piano as he walked toward the guys.

I went to the piano, still not believing this was real. It was like seeing an old friend again. All the dings that I put into it when I was a careless child running around the house. I ran my hand over the music rack. I glanced back at the guys. They were still standing, watching me. Still smiling, but actively wiping their eyes.

I sat down on the bench. When my fingers touched the keys, it felt like home. Most pianists will tell you that each piano has its own feel. The keys respond differently, they feel differently. You can adjust your playing to each piano, usually easily, but each pianist has that one piano that will always be their favorite. This piano was that for me. I'd played plenty of others, but this piano was always my favorite. Once I was older, my mother managed to buy a new piano. It was larger than this one, which she loved, but I did not, I hated it. It was all wrong. This one was perfect for me. Once she got the second piano, I always told her this one was mine. It crushed me to have to sell it.

I thought I would never see it again.

I took a deep breath and started to play, Craig had taken care of it all these years and it had been tuned since they moved it. It sounded perfect. It felt perfect. It was perfect. As I played, I was lost in thought. I knew Adrik had put this together. Clearly Ivan had a hand in it as well. I'm sure they all knew about it. That's why they've been grinning like idiots all day long.

I couldn't help but think about how they were all so different from the people I'd had in my life until I met them. Since losing my mom, I'd never really had anyone that I was that close to. Ms. Jackson was great. I loved her, but she didn't know everything about me. She kept an eye on me, she helped me, but I also kept my distance from her on many things. She didn't know i played. Max was the same way. He kept an eye on me, but he would ditch me more often than not. I'd had other friends, but they never lasted lung. I'd only dated once or twice before I met Adrik. Everyone in my life up until I met Adrik know as little about me as possible. I felt safer that way.

But then, these six men had come into my life and shown me not only what love was, but also what loyalty was, I knew that even if something were to happen In Adrik, the rest of them would make sure that I was never alone and was always looked after:

My mind went back to the day we went to the house after returning from Italy, when we were avoiding the house because of Tori. Misha had told me that I was so much like them it was scary, but I think I can now say the same thing about them. They were looking for ways to make me smile, to make me happy. Their future girlfriends better thank me.

I smiled, thinking about how I went from being completely alone to having six men willing to die for me. I felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude that our individual paths had led us all to this moment.

The song ended and I sat for a moment, still in shock over having my mom's plans back. I felt the tears threatening to fall once again, but I didn't care. I got up and turned toward where they were all standing, watching me. It was my turn to grin like an Idint as I walked quickly to Adrik. He opened his arms for me, still smiling at me. As soon as he opened his arms for me, I ran to him and jumped into his arms. I wrapped my legs around his waist, my arms around his neck.

"I didn't think you could make me any happier than you already do." I leaned back, holding his face in my hands. "I was wrong. I was so wrong," I said, smiling as my happy tears fell freely down my face. I pressed my lips to his, I felt his arms hold me Lighter. I unwrapped myself from him, going to Ivan next, "I know you had a very big hand in this, Super Squish," He grinned as he pulled me to him with his good arm, hugging me lightly.

I went to each one of the guys, thanking them each individually for making this happen, feeling incredibly grateful for each one of them.

Adrik pulled me close, looking at me thoughtfully. "You've been quieter than usual tonight. I just want to make sure you're really happy?" He was in his usual battle with the curls around my face, trying to get them to obey his commands.

"I'm really happy." I said, smiling at him. "I don't have the words to tell you how much. You gave me a piece of my childhood back. I don't know how to tell you how much that means to me." I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes as I looked at him, still smiling. I was surprised to see tears forming in his eyes. Ele pressed his palm to my cheek. "I would give you the world, solnishko."

Trino had a villa on one of the Caribbean islands where Adrik would sometimes meet with him. It was faster, and in this case, safer, than going all the way to Colombia. None of the other bosses knew of this meeting place and Trino wanted to keep it that way. He agreed to let Armando come, simply because Adrik asked.

Adrik had told Trino that he felt better meeting with him in person, given the circumstances, than speaking over the phone. He wanted to make sure their deal was still solid. Trino, of course, agreed to meet with Adrik right away. It appeared that Trino respected Adrik as much as Adrik respected him, but I was still to be the deciding factor.

Giana was excited to be going to the Caribbean. It was starting to get cooler in the city; she preferred the warmer climates. She had to go shopping again to buy winter clothes, but thankfully, she took Ms. Jackson and her own guards while we were at the house. I've never been more relieved in my life to have missed something.

I had to admit to looking forward to a few days on a tropical island. I'd already been to more places since I'd met Adrik than I had for my entire life. Misha felt like it was a good idea, so I tried to feel less nervous about going

Chapter One Hundred Fifty-Eight

Adrik

Sephie was right. Giana was latched onto her anytime she was around. We all thought Gluna was quiet, but it turns out she's only quiet until you take her shopping and then she won't stop talking. I caught myself wondering what conversations between her and Mando were like. They both like to talk so much, how did that work? Did they have to take turns talking? Was there ever silence?

The guys noticed it too, all giving Sephie sympathetic looks. We were on the plane, on the way to Trino's villa. For once, Armando was quiet. Maybe he had figured out how nice silence was now that he'd been with Giana for a short time. It was clear that he cared for her. We were all waiting for her to prove herself. No one had made a definitive decision on whether she was a keeper or not yet. Sephie had said that she was insecure with herself. I think we could all tell that she was still pretending to be someone she wasn't. We were waiting for her to just be herself around us.

I could tell Sephie's patience was starting to wear thin, but we couldn't figure out how to get her out of the situation, as we were all basically stuck together for the next hour. I was trying to have silent conversations with the guys to see if anyone could come up with a plan to save her.

Ivan stood up, faking a pain in his arm. Armando and Giana had no clue that he couldn't feel a thing and he took full advantage of that. He told Sephie that he had a weird pain and asked her if she could look at it to make sure one of his stitches hadn't popped.

Sephie stood up, looking completely relieved, and Giana stood as well, offering to help. Just when I thought Sophie was going to lose it, Ivan turned to look at Ginna with his murderous aura on full display. She quietly sat back down. The rest of us had to look away to keep from laughing as Sephie and Ivan walked to the back of the plane so she could "look" at lean's stitches.

Sephie's Russian was getting better and since she let us know that she was learning it, we had been speaking it more around her. She was getting more fluent in it, which came in handy in situations like this. They were speaking quietly, but we could still hear most of their conversation. She told Ivan that he saved her just in time. She was contemplating jumping out of the plane, just for some quiet.

I couldn't help but laugh. I tried to hide it by coughing, but the guys heard her too. They were all lighting back their own laughter. Armando and Giana both looked at us, fully aware something was going on. Stephen saved us all. He said, completely straight-faced, "It's never not funny when she threatens his life." Armando chuckled, but Gjana looked mortified.

Ivan and Sephie stayed in the back for a while longer, their conversation minimal. I was sure she was trying to stay back there as long as possible. Giana moved closer to Arntando, those two quietly talking. Sephie likely heard them talking and felt like it was safe to come back out. She looked apprehensive when she slid open the door from the back. She saw that Giana was occupied and she walked quickly to me, curling up beside me on the couch,

"All good?" I asked, to try and help them maintain their cover story.

She nodded. "Stitches are still good. I think the bandage caught one of the stitches and pulled on it slightly." She rested her head on my shoulder, whispering, "maybe if I pretend to sleep, it'll be okay," I chuckled, kissing her forehead.

"I see what you were talking about before," I said to her, speaking Russian. She sighed. I pulled her closer. We were almost to the island, where she could get a little time to herself, hopefully.

Armandu and Glana were still talking to each other quietly. Giana was speaking Italian. I'm not sure Armando had told her that Sephie could understand Italian. Sephie was clearly listening to their conversation as she mumbled "sh it" under her breath. I looked at her, raising my eyebrow. She smiled at me, whispering, "It's fine. I'm mostly just an as shole."

We landed soon after. Trino had arrived shortly before us and was there to greet us when we arrived. He surrounded himself with just as many trusted guards as I did. He'd also had the same ones for years, so they were all familiar faces. There was a mutual respect between his men and mine, as well between Trino and me.

"Jefe, it's good to see you again," Trino said, walking up to me with his hand extended.

I grasped his hand firmly. "Trino. It's been a while, my friend." Sephie was standing next to me. Trino's attention quickly shifted to her.

"And who is this beautiful senora, mi amigo?" he asked. She smiled at him, offering him her hand.

"Sephie," she said as he took her hand and kissed the back of it.

"Sephie? That's an unusual name," he said.

"It's short for Persephone," I said.

His eyes widened in understanding. "Dios mio."

She grinned at him. "Clearly you understand the reference."

He looked to me, still somewhat surprised, but smiling. "You two were clearly meant to meet, Jefe."

"You have no idea, Trino," I said. Armando and Giana stepped off the plane behind us. Trino greeted Armando and Giana as warmly as he greeted me and Sephie.

We made small talk while the guys got everyone's bags loaded onto the vehicles that Trino had brought to take us the short distance to his villa. It was a short drive from the runway to the house. The island was much smaller than the cities we were used to, but it still had everything we needed. And Trint's villa had its own private beach, which made it secluded and perfect for us to meet without anyone ever finding out.

I knew we were here on serious business, but I was also looking forward to a few days of not having to worry so much about Sephie's safety. It only helped that the setting was so beautiful.

Trino showed us to our rooms and left us to freshen up. Sephie collapsed on the bed. "Do you want to tell me why you think. you're an as shole, solnishko?" I asked, laying next to her. I propped myself up on my elbow so I could look at her.

She smiled at me. "Giana was talking about how nervous she was to be with us. Armando was trying to calm her down. That's probably why she was so talkative on the plane. She was just overly nervous and trying to calm herself down."

I chuckled. "It still doesn't mean you're in charge of calming her down, Sephie." I leaned down and pressed my lips to hers. "And you're not the only one that was contemplating jumping out of the plane for some peace," I smiled against her lips.

She giggled. "You guys heard that?" I nodded, which made her laugh more. She rolled into me, hiding her face in my shoulder, "I'm such a ho rrible person."

I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her on top of me as I rolled onto my back. "You're not a ho rrible person, solnishko. You're just a little bit evil. But I happen to love that about you, as I'm a lot evil," I said, grinning at her as I pulled her to me to kiss her.

Chapter One Hundred Fifty-Nine

Adrik

Sephie was somewhat retreshed alter a little time away from her new Italian shadow. We ventured out to find Trino. I needed her to spend as much time around him as she could, to get a feel for whether I could trust him or not. We found Ivan almost immediately when we lett on room. He had been sleeping better, with the recording of Sephee playing, so he was looking much more like himself, aside from still having his entire arm bandaged and in a sling. Andrei was almost back to normal. He could use his arm lightly and only had a small bandage over the wound the bullet left when it hit him.

“Super Squish the savior.” Sephie said with a grin on her face as we met van.

“I didn’t know I needed to tell you to keep all hands and feet inside the plane until the ride had come to a complete stop,” he said as he cut his eyes down at her, a small grin on his face. I was still surprised at how much funnier he was after being around Sephie for a relatively short amount of time. He had always been so quiet before she came into our lives. We all were. But now, because of her, we saw the tighter side of everything.

I found myself thinking about watching her at her piano a few days ago. She really had brought out the best in all of us. I’d never cared about making anyone happy before her. We all saw how much effort she put into making everyone around her happy. It was contagious. She did such an amazing job of it that we wanted to do the same for her. We were so excited for her to get her piano back. Every single one of us, men who had killed without a second thought, were wiping tears from our eyes watching her get her piano back. She was so happy and in turn, we were all happy. She was incredible,

Trino’s island house was spacious, with just as much outdoor space as indoor, given the perfect climate most of the year. We found him outside, with his second in-command, Martin, Good. Sephle will be able to meet lum as well.

“Tefe, come and sit,” Trino said, motioning for us to sit on the couches next to him, “I have to say I’m not sad about you bringing Sephic with you. She’s much nicer to look at than your men.” Sephie didn’t say anything, but she made sure she sat in between me and Ivan. I put my arm across her lap, my hand on her thigh.

I nodded toward Martin. “Good to see you again, Martin.”

He returned the nod. Martin was generally a very quiet man, which I appreciated. I looked to Trino, asking, “have you met with Dario and Massimo yet?”

Both Trino and Martin laughed. “No, man. It’s too much fun to make them wait. I would’ve thought they would have caught on by now, but they’re still down there waiting for me to see them. They call Martin every day to see if I can see them that day. Every day he says something came up. I’m a very busy man, as you can clearly see,” Trino said, opening his arms and gesturing around him to the emply island house. We all couldn’t help but laugh at his games with the other bosses. “Honestly, I wouldn’t mind not meeting with Massimo at all. That cabron…” He trailed off, but didn’t finish his thought. He looked to Martin as Martin cursed under his breath.

“What has Massimo done to you to make you ha te him so much?” Sephie asked

Tring looked at her, clear disgust on his face as he said, “we could never prove it, but we’re certain that Massimo killed my nephew. Or had him killed. I sent him to the city to keep an eye on Dario and Massimo. There were…discrepancies in their profits versus the product I was sending them. I knew they were stealing from me but needed someone closer to keep an eye on their operation I sent my nephew. He grit close. He let me know he was going to get the proof we needed the next day. heard from him again. No one knows what happened to him. Or more like no one will say what happened to him”

“What’s your nephew’s name?” Sophie asked. It was an innocent enough question, but I knew she was only asking might be able to give him a definitive answer.

because she

“Mateo.” I felt her squeeze my hand, still resting on her thigh, but she said nothing further about his nephew. I knew she would tell me later. I didn’t want to tell him too much until Sephie had a chance to “approve” Trino. I would wait to tell Tring about the information Sephie had on the other basses until after she gave him the okay, not before. Trina continued, “it’s only out of respect for you, Jefe, that I don’t put a bullet in his head when I eventually see him.”

I scoffed. I caught Ivan shift his position as well. We’d gotten confirmation that it was Massinu’s men that had tried to get lo Sephir when they left the piano gallery that day. “You’re free to put a builet in his head, Trino. It you don’t, I will,” I said. I felt Sephie squeeze my hand again. She mumbled, “amen to that,” causing Ivan to chuckle.

Trino looked at me, surprised at my reaction and curious as to what Sephie had said as well. She looked at him, frankly saying, “Massimo is the reason that Ivan almost died and Andrei got shot a few days ago Lying to keep me safe. Massimo can choke on a bag of di cks for all I care.”

Trino looked to me again, trying to contain his laughter. He was clearly not expecting that to come out of her mo uth, Ivan and I both laughed at her. She never ceased to surprise us with her comical creativity. Even Mutin, who was normally quiet was trying to hold in his laughter.

She looked at both Trino and Martin. “It’s okay to laugh. You know you’re thinking about the image of him choking. You can admit it.”

That was all it took. They both erupted into laughter. We all did. Ttino, still chuckling, said, “I can see why she’s so special, fefe. You better keep her or I’ll convince her to move to Colombia.”

Before I could answer, Ivan said, “good luck getting her to do anything she doesn’t want to. The day that Massimo’s men tried to grab her? She killed more men on her own than the rest of us did that day.”

“Dios mio. Really? Trine asked Sephle. She just shrugged her shoulders, leaning closer into me. I put my arm around her and pulled her closer. Trinn, now curious, asked, “why did Massinu try to grab her? To get to you, Jefe?”

“Possibly, yes. Right now, we just know that it was his men,” I sau.

We continued to talk about business, the other bosses, and what had been going on recently. Trino wasn’t happy with any of the bosses, except Armando and I. Considering Trino controlled the pipeline that delivered all the product we needed to fund nur Illegal enterprises, it was important to keep him on your good side, I drn’t feel like this was a difficult task, but clearly the other bosses were struggling with it.

Armando and Giana joined us eventually. Armando seemed at case with Trino. Giana seemed slightly terrified, but at least she was being quieter than on the plane. I watched Sephie watching Trino and Martin carefully, as well as how Armando and Trino interacted. Eventually, Trino’s men showed up, as well as Andrei, Misha, Viktor, and Stephen. Sephie stayed mostly quiet and watched everyone for most of the evening.

I would catch her eye occasionally, but each time she would smile sweetly at me, indicating that there was nothing to worry about on my end. After dinner, I pulled her aside and asked her what her thoughts were. I was almost positive I knew her answer but wanted to make sure before I went into any more details with Trino.

“I don’t see anything weird with Trino. Martin is a little harder to get a read on, because well, he never says anything, but 1 don’t feel like he’s got any hidden agendas. I get a good feeling from both. From what I’ve seen so far, you can trust him. It’s obvious he respects you and to a lesser extent, Armando. He has zero respect for the other bosses, especially Massimo.”

“I’in seriously considering letting him put a bullet in his head for me,” I said, pushing a stray curl from her face.

She looked at me seriously, then quickly looked around to see if anyone was close enough to hear. She stood on her toes, her mo uth next to my ear, “I know what happened to Mateo. I heard them talking about him after one of the meetings when they stayed later than everyone else. I’d never heard Mateo’s name mentioned before, so It plqued my interest. Massimo had him killed. I also remember Dario yelling at him for it. He was stated., More seared than I’d ever seen him. I didn’t know about Trino at the time. I don’t know if he was scared of Trinn or you. Or Massimo. Or all three.”

I looked at her as she stood in front of me. I could see the fear in her eyes. Knowing so much information about Massimo had already brought one kidnapping attempt on hei, almost killing Ivan in the process. She was scared to tell anyone about what she knew. I inhaled deeply, trying to think of options. On one hand, Tines would be even more in debt to me for knowing what happened to his nephew. I could also get him to take care of Massimo lor me. On the other, it put Sephie in danger for others. to know just how much she knew about the organization.

I kissed her forehead, “We’ll sleep on it. We can discuss it with the guys in the morning. As far as I’m concerned, being able to trust Trino is the main concern right now.”

She closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. She silently nodded her head, leaning into me, testing her head on my chest.

Chapter One Hundred Sixty

Adrik

Trino and his men enjoyed partying just as much as they enjoyed business. Every time I met him on the island, he would go to a popular nightclub until the early morning hours. He usually had friends flown in to party with him, along with plenty of girls for his friends and his men. Before Sephie, I would go to the club with him. It was never a bad time. It also gave the guys a chance to relax slightly. Now that Sephie was with us, I wasn't sure she would want to go. Giana was very excited about going. I found it amusing that Giana was a few years older than Sephie, but acted like she was the younger of the two.

"We don't have to go if you don't want to." I told her, as we were changing clothes.

She stopped and looked at me, half-serious, half-joking. "You know as well as I do that Tring will take it personally if we don't go with him. At least for a little while. It'll be tine. It's not something I regularly look forward to, but I can manage for a bit. Hopefully." She paused, then added, "I don't know if I'm more curious about how much a drunk Giana is going to talk or if I'm dreading it."

I cursed under my breath. "I didn't think about that. At least the music will be loud," I said, smirking at her. I walked behind her, sliding my hands around her hips. "At least it gave you a reason to wear a dress. I'm not complaining about that." I slid iny hands down her legs to the hem, pushing it up higher on her thighs as my hands roaited over her legs. The dress was short, but not so short that she needed to worry about bending over. It had long sleeves and a high neckline, covering all her scars. It fit her like a glove, though, which is what made it Incredibly sexy. She leaned back against me, catching my hands and wrapping them around her waist.

"You're going to distract me," she said, smiling up at me, while she pulled the skirt of the dress bark down on her legs. "Giana offered to help me tame my unruly hair and I'm trying to be nicer, so she feels more comfortable around so much testosterone, She's supposed to be here in a minute."

"But I love your unruly hair. It's one of my favorite things," I said as I turned her to face me so I could push her rebellious curls from her face. It had become a game for me to see if I could get her curls to du what I wanted. I lost every single time, but I still loved the game.

We heard a soft knock on the door. Sephic reached up and kissed me quickly. "I just love you," she said as she went to open the door for Giana.

Giana came with equipment. I wasn't sure Sephie's hair was going to win this round. Clearly, Giana was some kind of professional hair tamer. "I'll leave you two to it," I said, kissing Sephie on the cheek,

"Hopefully this won't take long, but don't hold your breath," she said.

I heard Giana tell her, "Don't worry, Sephic, I know what to do. My sister has curly hair. I've been doing her hair since we were kids," as I left the bedroom. Definitely some kind of professional.

It didn't take very long and both Sephie and Giana came out to find us. Giana had straightened Sephie's hair and put it in a high ponytail. She almost looked like a different person without her loose curls around her face. My breath still caught when 1 saw her. She was gorgeous no matter what she did or wore. But straight hair made her look different.

She caught me staring as she walked to me, a small smirk on her face. "It's weird, right?" she asked. She was smiling but I think she really was uncertain about my opinion.

I clicked my tongue. "You're beautiful no matter what, solnishko." I ran my hand through her ponytail. It felt completely different than her normal hair. I couldn't help but laugh, somewhat astonished at the difference. "It's so different." I looked down at her, grinning. "I don't know how I feel about this. I feel like I'm cheating on you. With you."

She laughed, planting a kiss on my lips. I reached up and ran my hand through her ponytail once more, then grabbed the whole ponytail and pulled gently. I leaned down, brushing her neck with my facial hair. "I could get used to this once in a while, though. Her breath hitched, ever so slightly and her cheeks were definitely flushed when she turned to look at me, a knowing look in her eye.

She wrapped her arms around my waist, looking me in the eye for a few moments. I saw a flash of uncertainty in her eyes. She didn't hide it like she normally did. Instead, she just asked, "you're not going to leave me at any point tonight, are you?"

I felt a pain in my chest, knowing she was still struggling to process everything that had happened since the ball. I put both hands on either side of her face, pressing my lips to hers. "I pinky swear I will not leave you the entire time we're there."

The club was packed, as it was every time we had been here before. Before we left Trina's villa, a few of the girls tried to get the attention of Misha and Andrei, but neither seemed very interested. I think the girls were scared of Viktor and Ivan. Stephen was making himself scarce, as usual. He was not one for socializing. Even with us, he would disappear on his own regularly.

I wasn't normally one to dance, but I found myself eagerly following Sephie to the dance floor. I couldn't take my eyes off her. It didn't seem to matter what she did with her hair or what she wote, she was the sexiest woman in the room to me. Now, with the difference in her straight hait, plus the new clothes, plus her willingness to get outside her comfort zone and even come to the club, it was like I was seeing a completely different side to her that I hadn't seen yet. I was intrigued.

The music was so loud, you could feel the bass vibrating your body. There were people everywhere. Sephie was following Giana, who had Armando in tow. Giana nuanaged to find a spot in the sea of people. Sephir pulled my arms around her, still facing away from me, us she started to move to the music. She was slightly tense and I could tell she was watching the people around us carefully. I turned her to face me, pulling her tight against me. "Just focus on me, solnishko," I said to her, my mo uth close to her ear. She leaned her head against mine and nodded slightly,

She eventually relaxed a little, as long as I kept my arms around her. She eventually pulled me off the dance floor, indicating she needed a drink. With so many people, so close together, it was warm in the club. I glanced toward Armando and Giana, but they were completely wrapped up in each other and duln't notice us leave.

I got water for Sephie. She drank hall, then handed it to me to finish. She was still watching everyone around us carefully. I pulled her closer to me, tracing my finger down her face. "You're not worried, are you?" She looked at me, puzzled. "You're watching everyone around us like you're expecting someone to do something."

Her beautiful smile stretched across her face, making my heart jump in my chest. "No, it's not out of worry now. It was when we first got here, but now I'm used to it. I've never been a fan of big crowds, but less so now," she said, looking down. I felt that pull in my chest as I knew she had been fighting to remain calm. She looked back up, a mischievous grin on her face. "It's out of curiosity now. I don't go to clubs very often, but when I do, I always try to pick out the couples that are still going to be together by the end of the night and the ones that will get together by the end of the night. It's like my own game that I play."

1 caught sight of one of Trino's men, talking to a girl at the bar. I nodded my head toward the couple. "What about those two?" 1 asked.

She watched them for a few minutes, then shook her no. "Not gonna happen. He's way too intense for her. He hasn't stopped talking about whatever it is he's talking about since you pointed them out and she's quickly losing interest. Ten bucks says she ditches him in the next 15 minutes,"

"You're on, I say It'll be at least 25." I said, motioning for the bartender to refill our water, Ivan and Viktor walked up to the bar.

"You two look like you're stirring up trouble," Viktor said.

Chapter One Hundred Sixty-One

Adrik

“Sephie just made a bet that the girl behind you will ditch Trino’s man in the next 15 minutes,” I said. Both Viktor and Ivan looked at the couple discreetly.

“And you bet against her?” Ivan asked.

“Oh, no. I’m not that stupid. We’re betting on the time limit. She says 15. I say 25,” I said, laughing.

Ivan looked back at the couple. “I give it 10.”

Sephie laughed at us. “Bet pool it is, gentlemen! Viktor, do you want to get in on this too?”

Viktor watched the couple for a moment. “Hell yeah. I’ll go 20.”

We stood at the bar, watching the first couple as best we could without being too obvious. Sephie picked out three more couples to add to the bet pool while we were waiting on the first couple. At the 10-minute mark, they were still talking. “Sorry, Super Squish. You’re out,” Sephie said, grinning. At the 15-minute mark, he bought her another drink. Sephie laughed, then looked to me. “You might win this one. Now it’s down to how fast she finishes that drink.”

Andrei and Misha walked up to us as we were laughing about yet another couple that Sephie had added to the bet pool. Ivan had made a comment that he didn’t know he should’ve brought a white board with him to keep track of everyone. We explained our game to Andrei and Misha, who of course wanted in on the action as well, making Ivan’s comment about the whiteboard all the more relevant.

At the 25-minute mark, the first girl walked away from Trino’s man. Sephie gave me a high-five. “I’m impressed,” she said, her wide smile stretching across her face. We quickly moved on to the next couple and kept track of who bet what. We spent most of the time we were there at the bar, watching other people.

We also enjoyed watching girls come up to Andrei and Misha and try to get their attention. As the night progressed and the alcohol flowed more freely, there were even a few girls who were brave enough to approach Ivan and Viktor. Ivan got plenty of sympathy for his bandaged arm. If he had wanted to, he could’ve milked that.

None of the guys were especially interested in any of the girls. They would leave for a song or two, but they always came back. I knew it was because it was more fun to see the results of the bet pool than it was with any of the increasingly drunk girls in the club. Drunk people are generally only fun to interact with if you’re also drunk. When you’re the sober one, they’re fun to watch, but not so much try and talk to. I never allowed my guys to drink while they were working, but it was really a useless rule at this point. They chose not to more often than not. Tonight, they could if they wanted to, but not a single one of them wanted to.

At one point it was just me and Sephie at the bar again. I had turned to get the bartender’s attention and a drunk guy approached Sephie, offering to buy her a drink. Because of the loud music, I didn’t hear him talking to her. When I looked back to her, she was politely declining his offer, but he wouldn’t take no for an answer. He reached out to try and touch her leg, as she was sitting on a bar stool. She moved her legs toward me, just as I stepped in front of her to stand between them. I didn’t even have to say anything. I just glanced down at the guy and he clearly understood that there would be no drinks with her in has future.

I felt her grab my hand as he walked away. She stood up and wrapped my arm around her waist. Since she was weating heels, at didn’t need to stand on her toes to kiss me. She leaned up and pressed her lips to mine “Thank you,” she said against my “Are you ready to leave yet, love?” I suddenly found myself wanting to be alone with her. She eagerly nodded her head, a smirk on her face that told me she knew exactly what I was thinking. Apparently, the guys also read my mind about leaving because they all showed back up at the same time.

I glanced at my watch. “It’s not too late yet. You guys are welcome to stay if you like, but I think Sephie and I are ready to leave.” They all glanced at each other and agreed that it was time to go. “Has anyone seen Stephen?” I asked. I felt Sephie grab my arm. She whispered in my ear, “he’s not ready to leave, but don’t ask anyone to look for him. I’ll explain later.”

I quickly told the guys to forget about it. If he was still somewhere in the club, that likely meant he was having fun. Sephie stepped away from the bar, sliding her arms through mine and Viktor’s arm, saying, “come, let us be gone from this place.”

It was a beautiful night and Trino’s villa was only a short distance away, so we opted to walk. Halfway to the villa, Sephie stopped and took her heels off. “I don’t know how women walk in these things all day long.” She kept walking, barefoot, then looked to me and asked, “why are you so reliant on my observation skills when you’re the one that was more accurate than everyone else in the bet pool tonight?”

I laughed. “Different set of skills, solnishko. You’re excellent at knowing what someone is going to do before they do it and when they’re trying to hide something. If I know what someone is going to do, I can predict the timing of it. I have a hard time telling what someone is going to do before they do it, though.” I pulled her closer to me, adding, “this is why I need you. Always.”

She grinned at me. “And together, we shall rule the world!” I picked her up against my hip, spinning her around as she giggled.

“Nothing can stop us!” I said, joining in with her.

“I love a good late night world domination plan,” she said, still grinning at me.

We basically had the villa to ourselves once we got back, as everyone else was still at the club. We talked with the guys for a few minutes, made plans to get up and workout the next morning, but then we all went our separate ways. As we walked to our bedroom, Sephie took her hair down, scratching her head and letting her hair fall down her back. When it was straight, it was a good 2-3 inches longer than when it was curly. It fell almost to her butt.

I closed the door behind us quickly, then grabbed her and pulled her to me. She squealed as she wasn’t expecting it. I looked at her, my hand running through her hair. I couldn’t get over how different it felt. “I love your hair when it’s wild and unruly, because that’s you and that will always be you. But this version of you can come to visit every once in a while.”

“So, you can cheat on me, with me?” she said, laughing.

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Chapter 162

Chapter One Hundred Sixty-Two

Adrik

“Exactly.” I grinned at her. She was still smiling as she lifted her hair and turned away from me, asking me to unzip her dress. I happily obliged and watched her shimmy out of the dress in front of me. I hadn’t seen her choice of lingerie when she got dressed, I inhaled sharply watching her bend over to step out of the dress. She exaggerated pushing her a ss back toward me, knowing she was driving me crazy. As soon as she stood up, my hands were on her, pulling her hack against me. I pressed my face against her neck, knowing it would drive her crazy. She leaned her head back against my shoulder and lifted her arms. behind her to wrap them around my neck, giving me full access to her body. My hands roamed freely over her entire body. Always feeling like I could never get enough of her.

She turned to face me, her lips finding mine while her hands quickly unbuttoned my shirt. She pushed it off my shoulders, letting it fall to the floor behind me. She immediately went to work on my belt and pants, also letting them fall to the floor. She stepped back from me, a sly smile on her face as she walked to where she had thrown her heels when she walked into the bedroom. She put each one back on, then walked back to me. She ran her hands over my chest, but then turned away from me, once again pressing her a ss into my hips. She glanced over her shoulder, “this might’ve been all I could think about while we were dancing earlier.”

I exhaled loudly. “You and me both.” I grabbed her hip with one hand, pulling her tight into me while I pushed her, torso forward with my other hand. She still had her lingerie on, but I couldn’t be bothered to even rip it off. I simply pushed it to the side, granting me access and slammed into her from behind. She was the perfect height with the heels and the combination of her being in a short dress all night, plus her striptease meant I was struggling to contain myself. She moaned loudly when I first entered her, which was all it took for me to lose control. I had stopped holding back long before this, but this might be a new level of arousal for me. I loved the way she kept surprising me with new ways to turn me on and make me want her even more. I wanted to show her what she did to me.

Her intensity matched mine completely. I was holding on to her hips, but she was pushing back into me with each thrust. The harder I went, the louder she moaned. I felt her getting closer to the edge and I felt my own body respond to hers. I tried to draw out her o*gasm as long as possible, but I was so turned on that I eventually exploded inside her, groaning when I came.

We were both out of breath. She stood up and leaned back against me. I wrapped my arms around her, holding her close. I brushed her neck with my stubble as she moaned quietly. “You might have to have s ex like that with the other version of me too. She might get jealous,” she said, laughing.

I laughed, picking her up off the floor and walking to the bed. I fell onto the bed with my arms wrapped around her. She kicked her shoes off and curled up in my arms. She rolled over to face me, her fingers running through my facial hair. I looked at her. “There’s only you, Sephie. It never matters what you do with your hair or what you wear, you’ll always be the most beautiful woman in the room to me. I can’t take my eyes off you. Ever.”

She looked surprised at my words, but leaned in and kissed me gently. “I love you, Adrik.”

I pulled her closer, returning her kiss. “And I love you, Sephie. Always and forever.”

She snuggled in closer to me as my hands ran through her hair. “What about Stephen? What do you know that likely no one else has figured out yet?” 1 asked, curious about what she had told nu before we left the club.

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She chuckled. “I am surprised it took me so long to figure it out and I’m also shocked that no one else has picked up i raghed.

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I thought for a minute. It did make several things make more sense. He never spoke of girlfriends, he was the least likely to want to spend time with Sephie in the beginning, and he tended to keep to himself more than the other guys did. I chuckled. “It does make sense.” I kissed her forehead. “What would I do without my little secret weapon?”

“Not rule the world. Clearly.”

There were people passed out around the entire house when we got up the next morning. Instead of trying to find a place in the house, we went to the beach. Trino didn’t have a gym in his house, but we had all agreed that we could do some light sparring on the beach after what Viktor liked to call his Syrian workout. It was how he passed the time in his jail cell, when they weren’t trying to torture information out of him.

Sephie’s hip was much better. She was almost completely back to normal. She’d stop bandaging it and it was still healing. She was weaker on that leg still, but that was the only thing noticeable now from the night of the ball. Each time I saw her workout, she seemed stronger. She was enjoying learning how to defend herself before the ball, but since then and especially since Massimo’s attempt to grab her, she’d poured herself into training with the guys. She was more driven than I’d ever seen her. They all enjoyed sparring with her. Viktor, Ivan, and Stephen would take it easy on her, but Andrei and Misha would push her buttons each and every time. They’d push her to the point of anger and then they’d have an all-out fight on their hands. I think they wanted to challenge themselves as much as they wanted to challenge her.

Viktor and Andrei had been working on teaching her new moves. Andrei still wasn’t 100%, so Misha was sparring with her. while Viktor and Andrei coached her technique. Ivan was standing next to me, watching. Stephen had opted for a solo run around part of the island.

“She’s getting stronger since the night of the plan gone wrong. Her hip doesn’t seem to bother her much at all anymore,” Ivan said, running his good hand through his goatee.

“She’s been leaving the bandage off it lately, but it still looks good. It’s still healing. She was so happy to be rid of the bandage.” I said, chuckling.

“I know how she feels,” he said, smiling.

Chapter One Hundred Sixty-Three

Adrik

We watched as Misha said the exact thing that would flip the switch with Sephie. She went from defense to offense in a second. We both laughed. “I think he wants to challenge himself more than he wants to challenge her,” I said.

“I think you’re right, but I must admit that I like seeing it. She needs to know her power, should she ever need it. What was her opinion on Trino and Martin last night? I mean, before everyone was drunk at the club,” Ivan asked.

“She felt like I can trust him. She knows what happened to his nephew though. She’s ‘understandably worried about telling him that she knows,” I said, looking at him to gauge his reaction to that news.

He chuckled. “I was pretty sure she knew something when she asked him what his nephew’s name was. She only ever asks questions like that when she already knows the answer.”

We watched her push Misha back toward the water. She was smaller than him, but that also meant she could be faster than him. When she was on offense, she was relentless. She wouldn’t give you a second to think. She could read you as well and know what you were thinking, perfectly countering any strike you might be able to sneak in. Once she had you on the move backward, you were just about done for. Misha had more room here, so we were letting it go on longer than we would have in the gym. Once you hit the ropes, that usually meant you should give it up, especially if you’d made her angry. She wasn’t going to stop. I think Viktor and Andrei were curious to see how long Misha could last.

Misha tripped on a piece of driftwood that had washed ashore. He stumbled but didn’t go down completely. She didn’t take him down, like we were all thinking she was going to. Instead, she stopped, clearly out of breath. Misha was even more out of breath.

It had been cool when we got to the beach that morning, so everyone had long sleeve shirts on. Now, it was warming up. If you weren’t moving much, it was still pleasant, but those two had definitely worked up a sweat. Misha pulled his shirt off. He clearly made a sm art-a ss remark to her. They were far enough away that we couldn’t hear him, but we could see the smirk on his face. She surprised me by pulling her shirt off as well. She had a sports bra on. She’d taken her shirt off around us before, as we’d all seen her scars, but I was surprised she would do it here. Maybe that means she feels more comfortable in her own skin now. They talked for a minute, but then picked up the fight where they left off. Only instead of pushing Misha toward the water, he turned so she was pushing him back toward us. Viktor and Andrel had joined me and Ivan to watch the free entertainment.

“I’m really surprised he’s still going. I don’t think I would’ve lasted this long.” Viktor said.

“He’s clearly having fun pi ssing her off,” Andrei said, “I mean, not gonna lie, that’s why I do it. And she’s also a he ll of a challenge when you pi ss her off.”

As we stood and watched them coming slowly back toward us, we were joined by Trino and Martin, then Armando and Giana. Some of Trino’s men wandered out to join us, as well. Everyone was speechless watching Misha and especially Sephie.

“Jefe,” Trino said, his eyes wide watching her. I looked over to him, expecting him to finish the thought, but he just stood there with his mo uth open.

Viktor, like a proud older brother, said, “everyone thinks that they’ll have to deal with us if they hurt her, which is true. But they don’t know they’ll also have to deal with her.”

Armando laughed. “She broke one of my guys’ faces. He’s still not completely over it*

Ivan looked at Armando and said seriously, “she isn’t either. She’t still pi ssed at that guy”

I could hear the slight edge to his voice. That night was still a sore spot for all of us. Armando chuckled, shaking his head, still amused at the thought of Sephie breaking his guy’s face.

Trino spoke up, “remind me to never pi ss her off. Or you, for that matter, Jefe. I don’t want to have to deal with her bad side. Ever.”

Andrei laughed. “She’s finally living up to her namesake. I’m not sure how much longer she’s going to need us.”

We saw Misha and Sephie stop. They were still far enough away that no one could see her scars and Misha was doing what he does best. He made sure to keep his body between Sephie and the rest of us, so she would be shielded from view. He pulled her to him to hug her, so I knew the round was over. I walked to them, pulling my shirt off to give to her. I was happy she was comfortable enough around all of us to take her shirt off, but I didn’t want her to feel uncomfortable around everyone else. I also liked that she was as modest as she was. I found myself really enjoying that there were things she would only share with me.

“See, this is why I love you,” she said as she took my shirt and pulled it over her head. I couldn’t help it. Every time I saw her in one of my shirts, I struggled to control myself. “Are you ready for a shower yet, solnishko?” I asked in her ear, knowing she would know exactly what I was thinking about. I walked back to the rest of the group, as Giana walked up to talk to Sephie and Misha, looking forward to having her all to myself later.

They were telling Trino and Martin that Sephie had kicked all their as ses at one point or another when I walked up. Trino was still astounded, but impressed. Martin’s phone rang as we were talking. He stepped away for a quick moment, but then came right back. He had a frustrated look on his face as he walked back to us, placing his phone back in his pocket.

“Que pasa, Martin?” Trino asked.

Martin said, not sure whether he should be mad or amused, “one of the guys at home said that Massimo’s girlfriend is stinking up the place. Like the entire house smells like her now.”

We all looked at each other, trying to hold in our laughter. Viktor said, “add her to the list of people that have witnessed Sephie’s anger.” Trino looked at Viktor, wide-eyed, likely thinking that Sephie broke her face too. Viktor laughed. “Sephie verbally annihilated that girl when she showed up unannounced in Boss’s office, trying to start some sh it.”

“Jefe, I’m starting to get jealous of you. I thought I was having all the fun with the other bosses, but it sounds like you take the fun with you wherever you go,” Trino said, laughing.

Misha and Sephie walked up to us, just as we were laughing at Trino. He looked to Sephie and Misha, now clearly friends again after what likely looked like an all-out fight to everyone else. She handed me my shirt back as Trino said, “Ah, I’m glad to see you two don’t really ha te each other. It was difficult to tell earlier.”

Misha just laughed. “That’s not even possible.” We all exchanged knowing looks with each other.

Chapter One Hundred Sixty-Four

Sephie

I'd been working on trying to get control of my anger anytime I felt it take over. Viktor and Andrei had both told me that I could use my anger to my advantage, but I had to get control over it. Instead of seeing nothing but red, I was trying to focus on the person in front of me. Misha, in this case. Misha and Andrei both enjoyed making me angry when we sparred together. They said I was more of a challenge when I was angry. I didn't mind, as it helped me practice getting control of it.

I was starting to see what Viktor and Andrei had been telling me. It felt like I had a clear advantage when they pushed me to the point of anger. I felt stronger, somehow. I could read Misha easily, so I knew what his default counterattacks were. Like his paper, rock, scissors game, he was fairly predictable. I wasn't going to tell him yet that he was so predictable. I needed the practice for now. But eventually, I was going to have to tell him he needed to switch his game up.

We both stopped when he tripped. I was completely out of breath and so was he. He pulled his shirt off, telling me that he hadn't planned on working this hard this morning. I thought for a moment. I was sweating. It was hot in this long-sleeve shirt. I knew my cheeks were likely red at this point. Fu ck it. I pulled my shirt off too and threw it beside his. They'd all seen me with my shirt off when we were at home. They'd all seen my scars. I kept them covered if there was a chance anyone else would be around, however.

Misha grinned at me, knowing that I wasn't done yet either. "Gazelle, you're getting better at focusing through your anger. I know you're still angry, but you're controlling it, which is making me have to work harder."

"Maybe later I'll thank you. You know, when I'm done kicking your a ss," I said, smiling at him.

He was right. I was getting better. I always had fun when I sparred with them, once I got the basics, but there was a hint of nervousness in the beginning. I felt overwhelmed, trying to constantly fend them off. The first time Andrei pi ssed me off, all I could see was red. Now, I was beginning to learn how to use my anger to my advantage and I had to admit, it was fun. It was like they woke the beast, but I was learning to control the beast.

We hadn't been paying attention to the growing crowd that was now forming by the other guys. Armando and Giana had gotten up and come outside to find us. Trino and Martin had also gotten up and wandered to the beach when they noticed we were out there. A few of Trino's men were also making their way to the beach, as Misha and I continued.

I was starting to wear down and I knew Misha was too. He was starting to get slower. I had to pull a few punches so they wouldn't land, as he was too slow to dodge them. I didn't really want to hurt him. He rallied and managed to push me back a few steps. As he was coming at me, he said, "I think we should stop, gazelle. I'm hungry, anyway." I could see him smirk. He likely knew that telling me he was hungry was going to make my stomach join the party.

"You're just trying to wake my stomach up so she'll take over and you'll get a break," I said, dodging and blocking his hands.

"Maybe a little. But there's lots of people behind us now too. I don't know how much of a show you really want to give them," he said.

I slowed, remembering my shirt was somewhere on the beach at this point. "Solid point, my adorable Russian guardian." We were both out of breath. He reached out and pulled me in for a sweaty hug. "Eww gross, how did you get so sweaty?" I asked, laughing.

Adrik had walked over to us when he saw us stop He pulled his shirt off and handed it to me, knowing I would want to cover up before going any closer to the rest of the people. I smiled at him, taking his shirt "See, this is why I love you," I said, pulling his oversize shirt over my head. He leaned in and whispered in my bar so Misha couldn't hear, "are you ready for a shower yet, solnishko?" He had that sexy smirk that I loved on his face, as he walked back toward everyone else. I was sure my cheeks got even redder, thinking about showering with him.

Giana walked up to us, leaving Armando talking with Trino and Martin. "Wow, Sephie, I had no idea you were such a ba dass," she said, her caramel eyes wide as saucers, as she tried not to stare at Misha's shirtless torso. Misha laughed, shaking his head as he jogged off to grab our shirts. "You guys missed a good party last night. Why didn't you guys stay?"

"Eh, it's not really my thing, but I'm glad you had a good time," I said to her. Misha walked up, handing me my shirt.

Giana continued, quietly saying, "why do you cover up, Sephie? Your body is amazing. You should show it off more. I would totally show it off if my body was like yours."

I laughed. "Some things are meant to only be seen by a very select group of people. And your body can also be like mine. You just have to work at it. I wasn't born this way. Just like Misha wasn't born looking like that either."

"Hey, you speak for yourself, gazelle. I came out incredibly handsome. My m om told me so," Misha said, laughing. He purposely left his shirt off, because he knew it was making Giana all hot and bothered. I grinned at him. I held up my shirt, asking him "do you mind so I can give Ghost his shirt back?" He nodded and stepped between me and Giana, providing a visual barrier so I could change back into my shirt.

Giana, still puzzled, asked, "are you like super religious or something? You act like my grandmother about some things."

I was about to answer as I walked from behind Misha, but instead he asked, "why is it so difficult to understand that she doesn't want everyone to see her body? You realize she's got way more to offer than just her body, right? Do you want men to only think about your body or would you prefer they respected your mind too?"

I leaned into Misha as he was talking. He just slung his arm across my shoulders as he continued asking Giana questions. Giana was flustered for a moment, not sure of how to respond.

I smiled at her. "Much like the party last night, showing off my body is not really my thing either. But I can talk to Andrei about finding you a trainer when we get back if you want yours to look like mine. It's not a bad idea for you to know how to defend yourself anyway, whether you stay with Armando or not."

She was quietly contemplating what I had said to her as Misha pulled me away, toward Adrik. He said, in Russian, as we walked away, "Ten bucks says she won't do it."

I cut my eyes up at him, "that's an unfair bet, my adorable Russian guardian. We both know that's the only outcome of that situation. There's only a very slim chance she's going to work that hard. If only she could get fit by shopping. If we could figure out a way to make that happen, we'd be rich!" I said, laughing.

We walked up to Adrik and the rest of the group. I traded Misha for Adrik, handing him his shirt back. Trino spoke when we walked up. "Ah, I'm glad to see you two don't really ha te each other. It was difficult to tell earlier."

Misha chuckled. "that's not even possible."

Adrik pulled his shirt back on, then opened his arm for me to tuck myself into his side. He leaned his head down and kisses my forehead as I leaned against him. I looked up to notice Trino watching us. He had a serious look on his face, but his eyes were smiling, almost like he was lost in thought. Giana joined us, walking up to Armando, who grabbed her hand. They were still a new couple and unsure about showing affection in front of people. She shyly looked at him but stepped closer to him. If that moment hadn't been so awkward between them, it might've been sweet.

Adrik asked, in Russian, if I was ready for that shower yet. I grinned at him, nodding my head. He turned to everyone and excused us for a few while we showered and changed. He told Tring he had more business to discuss once he was fully awake later. The guys all came with us, as they needed showers as well after our morning Syrian workout on the beach. Once we were closer to our rooms, ! motioned for them all to follow us into our ipuin

Chapter One Hundred Sixty-Five

Sephie

Once inside, with the door closed, I said to all of them, “I know what happened to Trino’s nephew, but I’m scared to tell him. I don’t want to bring even more attention to me, but it could also keep Trino in debt to Adrik, which could be quite useful, so I don’t know what to do.”

I noticed Adrik raised an eyebrow when I mentioned keeping Trino in debt to him, but he waited for the guys to think it over before speaking. It was one of the many things I admired about him. He always took their thoughts, opinions, and suggestions into consideration before making decisions. Especially if those decisions affected all of us. He was, after all, the King of the Underworld. He didn’t need to take anyone’s opinion into consideration, but it was clear that he trusted the guys and sought out their opinions regularly.

Viktor asked, “what are your thoughts on Trino after spending time with him?”

“I think he’s trustworthy. I don’t think he’s holding anything back from us, except maybe the extent of his hatred for Massimo. He’s trying to be respectful of Adrik, so it’s understandable. From what I’ve seen of Martin, he’s also trustworthy, but he’s slightly more difficult to gauge because he rarely talks. They both respect Adrik and Armando, although not as much. I’m not sure if it’s because they know Armando doesn’t have as much power or if they just don’t know him as well. I didn’t get the feeling it was anything bad. It felt like they were awkward because they didn’t know each other well. There’s clearly no love lost between Trino and the other bosses, however,” I said, smiling.

They were all silent for a few more minutes. I could see Misha running through scenarios in his head, checking out each possibility. I think the others were waiting for him to speak first, honestly.

Ivan spoke up. “you’re positive you know what happened to him?”

“Well, as positive as I can be. I overheard Massimo and Dario talking after one of the meetings. Massimo told Dario that he had ‘that nuisance Mateo taken care of and dumped in his usual spot. I’d never heard the name Mateo before, so it piqued my interest. I found a reason to stay in the room. It was one of the only times I saw Dario get angry with Massimo. He wasn’t only angry though, he was scared. I just don’t know who he was scared of. I didn’t know about Trino or Adrik at the time.”

Ivan thought for a few moments. “This might prove to be useful. It might be a way to turn Dario and Massimo against each other. Create more chaos,” he said, looking to Adrik.

Misha had finished running through possibilities in his head. “I don’t see a problem with you telling Trino what you know. If you feel like we can trust him, I think it’s a good move. I agree with you and Ivan that it might be useful to keep him in debt to us, so to speak, and can possibly create more chaos.”

Adrik looked to Viktor, who nodded, then Andrei and Stephen, who also nodded their heads. He pulled me to him, holding me close. “You ultimately get the final say, solnishko. If you’re too worried about telling him what you know, then we’ll keep it between us right now”

“I’m happy to tell Trino what I know, if you give him permission to take care of Massimes That’s one less we have to worry about,” I said

Adrik was massaging my shoulders.

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around his neck, just wanting to hold him close to me. He held me even tighter, as we stood in silence for a few moments, just the two of us.

As we were getting dressed, he said, “you look like you’re doing a better job of getting control of your anger. Misha looked more tired than you did by the end this morning.”

I smiled. “I had to pull a few punches because I misjudged how slow he was getting. I’ll never hear the end of it if I wreck his pretty face.”

Adrik laughed. “No. No, you won’t. But I think watching you with Misha this morning somehow gained me brownie points with. Trino. He was quite impressed.” He walked to me, pulling me into his arms again. “I mean, we all know you’re impressive, but I have to admit to secretly loving it when I see other people realize it for the first time.

I hid my face in his shoulder. I still struggled with him telling me I was impressive in any way. He chuckled and kissed the top of my head. “Come, we should go find Trino. You can tell him the story about how you ‘verbally annihilated,’ as Viktor put it, Vanessa in my office.” He saw the shock on my face and added, “She’s with Massimo. Martin said one of his guys called to complain that she was stinking up the place this morning while we were on the beach.”

I laughed loudly. “If Trino takes care of her too, do you think the perfume maker that makes that particularly hellish scent will go out of business after losing their best customer? I mean, we could be doing the entire world a favor here.”

Chapter One Hundred Sixty-Six

Sephie

Adrik spent most of the afternoon talking with Trino, Martin, and Armando. They discussed options for how to take care of the other bosses, as well as how to restructure the organization to get rid of the need for the other bosses. The more that they talked, the more that I liked Trino. He was cut from the same cloth as Adrik.

Massimo's name came up in the conversation. I looked at Adrik, who gave me a slight nod, I took a deep breath and looked at Trino. "Trino, I know what happened to Mateo." I started to fidget with my hands as I continued. "All of the bosses used to meet once a month at the restaurant I used to work at. They always requested me to serve them, so I would overhear, well, everything. Regularly, Dario and Massimo would stay after everyone else was gone and have their own meeting. I overheard them talking about Mateo and I was curious, because I'd never heard that name before. Massimo told Dario that he'd had Mateo taken care of and dumped in the normal spot. For what it's worth, it was the only time that I ever saw Dario get angry with Massimo. He was scared. At the time, I didn't know about you or even Ghost, so I don't know if Dario was scared of Massimo, you, or Ghost. Or all of you."

Trino was silent for a few moments. I could see the emotions as he felt them. He went through all of them, quickly. He stood up, walking straight to me. I tensed, as I didn't know him very well. He offered me his hand, as he knelt in front of me. "Sephie. I can't even begin to thank you for the closure you've just given me. And his mother, my sister. The not knowing was eating her." He took my hands in his and kissed each one. When he looked at me, there were tears in his eyes. I couldn't help it. I leaned forward and hugged him.

Adrik broke the silence. "Not many people know of her knowledge about the organization, but Massimo and Dario both do. That's why Massimo's people tried to grab her last week. I would like to keep it to not many people knowing about her knowledge of the organization."

Trino stood up and looked at Adrik very seriously. "Jefe, you have my word. No one will know how I came across this information outside this room."

"If you keep Sephie out of it, you're free to do whatever you like to Massimo," Adrik said.

"I kind of think this will separate Dario and Massimo, if you tell Dario that you know Massimo killed Mateo. Dario isn't as bad as Vito, but he's got a fragile psyche. You could easily shatter it. And there's a weird dynamic between Massimo and Dario. Massimo is the one that runs the show between those two, but somehow, I don't think he'll be as bold without Dario as his cover," I said.

Trino, now returned to his seat, looked at me thoughtfully, then looked to Adrik, then back to me. "Please tell me you have a sister that loves Colombian men."

I laughed. "Sorry to disappoint. I'm an only child. But I can offer my vetting services if you'd like me to interview potential girlfriends for you."

Armando said, "I can vouch for her professional skills. I'm going to pay her to be at as many of my important meetings as possible."

Trino laughed, but that serious look came back over his face that he had while we were on the beach, like he was lost in thought, I caught Adrik's eye, to see if he noticed it as well. He nodded discreetly, pulling me closer to him.

Viktor walked into the room, looking very serious. "Boss, we've got a problem."

Adrik

We found Trino and Martin, as well as Armando, and found a quiet spot to discuss business that afternoon. Most important, was trying to come up with a plan for how to handle the other bosses in the city. I was beginning to think that I didn't need any of them, other than Armando. They were becoming more of a headache than they were a help to the organization.

"What do the people of the city think of the other bosses, Jefe?" Trino asked.

I thought for a moment. "It depends on which one, really. Armando is well liked, as he does a tremendous amount of work for the people in his area of the city. Up until recently, most of the other bosses were mostly the same, but I'm hearing reports now that Salvadori's area of the city is not happy with him. Same for Dario and Massimo's areas. Vito's people seem to be happy with him, but I'm not sure they'll stand behind him if a war breaks out in the city like they're planning. Niko's area of the city is mostly quiet now, but same as Vito. I'm not sure his people will stand behind him.

"Trino, the people of the city favor Ghost over the other bosses. Hands down. If it comes down to it, they'll stand with Ghost over any of the other bosses," Armando said. I felt Sephie squeeze my hand that was across her lap, resting on her thigh.

"This is good. If you have the support of the people, that goes a long way. That's how I inevitably took over in Colombia. The people loved me. They helped me fight the other guys that were trying to take over. There's something to be said for the popular vote, if you will," Trino said, a small smile on his face. "What about the police? Are they with you or against you?" he asked.

"Most of the precincts in the city are with me. I've made sure that the other bosses maintain order in their areas, keeping crime-to a minimum. Given that we're still heavily involved in illegal businesses, the city is quite peaceful, which makes the cops' jobs incredibly easy. Violent crime is kept to a minimum. They get their cut, of course, but I have a good relationship with the commissioner. They've come to me before with funding issues and the like that I've helped them solve," I said.

"Just you or the other bosses as well?" Trino asked.

"Mostly me, when it comes to the commissioner. The other bosses deal with the local police chiefs in their areas," I said.

"I've never had a conversation with the commissioner, but I have a great relationship with the police chief in my area of the city. They would back us, I think, if it was needed," Armando added.

"I got the impression that Anthony and Lorenzo were planning something big in the city as a way to get back in. They were trying to convince me that there was already disorder in the city, with you being gone. They also tried to convince me that Mando had been killed overseas. I knew for sure that you were still alive when I met with them, Iefe, but I didn't get word on Armando until a few days later when my people saw him back in the city," Trino said.

I noticed Armando was slightly surprised at this revelation. He didn't know that Trino had people in the city. None of the other bosses knew. Trino was never concerned about Armando, but he was about the other bosses, so I agreed to let him have people in the city. He was also in regular communication with some of my people. It's one reason that he's stayed so loyal to me. I'm as transparent with him as possible. I recognize his value and he recognizes mine. Mutual respect goes a long way.

I sighed. "We think they're planning on creating chaos in the city. They had a test run where they gave two guys brawn and sent them on Sephie and Misha. They've been working on a new formulation that increases the violence even more."

Trino and Martin both cursed under their breath. "I do not like this new drug, brawn. It's dangerous. It's also lethal if you take too much. Why would you want to kill your customer base? That's bad business," Martin said.

"Most of the bosses had cut it out of the city. It hasn't been around for a few years now. The dealers were forbidden to make it. Apparently, Salvadori has been quietly working on this new formulation undetected. Or maybe Anthony was working on it. That kid is off the talls," Armando said.

"Is it true he's been trafficking girls? Trino asked.

I nodded my head. "It took me a while to get confirmation on it, but he has been for some time now. He was smart about it and very discreet about it, so I didn't find out right away. He runs that operation from outside the city, with help from Lorenzo in Sicily. Apparently, when my father banished Enzo, he went to Sicily and that's how he made money and built his fortune back up. He's got networks throughout Europe."

Both Trino and Martin looked disgusted. It was a big problem, worldwide, but they wanted no part of it.

"It fits Anthony's profile, if I'm being honest. He needs to…compensate for a very significant shortcoming. He can feel powerful when he's determining someone else's fate," Sephie said

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 167

Chapter One Hundred Sixty-Seven

Adrik

We all turned to look at her, not entirely sure what she meant. She looked at all of us, like she was trying to get us to understand what she meant, silently. “Oh, you’re gonna make me say it? For real?” she said, her cheeks slowing turning red as we kept looking at her. She sighed. “He’s got a tiny d ick. There, I said it.” I raised an eyebrow, demanding more of an explanation. She clearly saw my anger rise to the surface quickly, which made her shrink back from me slightly. “He, uh, pressed himself against me when he was choking me in the hallway that night in the restaurant,” she said quietly. She quickly looked at the floor, her hands starting to fidget.

I wrapped my arm around her, pulling her to me. I kissed her temple. Trino looked surprised. “He did what to you?” he asked.

I held Sephie tighter, answering for her. “At the last meeting at the restaurant that Sephie used to work at, Anthony dared to lay his hands on Sephie in the meeting. He saw my anger when it happened. It was the first time I’d seen Sephie, but I knew I loved her from the first moment. Anthony caught her in the hallway alone later and tried to touch her, but she resisted. He choked her. Viktor and Andrei pulled him off her and beat him senseless.” I could feel my anger threatening to take over. Sephie, of course, felt it. She reached over and grabbed my other hand, holding it with both of hers. Her fingers lightly fidgeting with mine.

“And you didn’t ki ll him right there?” Trino asked, shocked.

“I wanted to, but I still had an ounce of respect for his father, Salvadori, at the time. I wish I would have now. We might not be in this mess now,” I said, sighing.

Armando spoke up. “I’m really beginning to question whether he needs the other bosses at all, at this point. I say get rid of all of them. Ghost can run the city on his own.”

Sephie looked up at me, somewhat surprised. I don’t think she’d thought of that option yet. “It makes sense. The city loves you,” she said, pulling her knees up so her feet were on the couch. She leaned her legs in my lap.

“They have their rightful King and Queen. What more do they need?” Trino said, smiling.

“Please tell me you have a sister that loves Colombian men,” Trino said, after Sephie had given her insightful opinion on how to separate Dario and Massimo using the information she had just given him.

“Sorry to disappoint. I’m an only child. But I can offer my vetting services if you’d like me to interview potential girlfriends for you,” she said, laughing.

Armando shifted in his seat. “I can vouch for her professional skills. I’m going to pay her to be at as many of my important meetings as possible.”

Trino still looked like he was both lost in thought and also completely captivated by Sephie when Viktor walked into the room. He looked directly at me “Boss, we’ve got a problem” I felt Sephie sit up a little straighter next to me, all of us waiting for Viktor to elaborate “I just heard from Andy One, he needs us to get him out. Two, he said he can fill us in on Salvadori’s plan. He wouldn’t say much over the phone, but he said he saw it with his own eyes and it has the potential to be very bad”

My mind was busy thinking through possibilities when Sephir asked, “who’s Andy **

“He’s one of Sal’s most trusted men. He’s the one that informed Boss about Anthony’s EA giving us information when he can, but Sal sa to him now. Sal’s been suspect

rricular activities. He’s bett

month Andy has been

able to placate him, but he started asking too many questions about the details of the plan and he thinks Sal has caught on to him. He knows Andy is feeding info either to Boss or Armando at this point. Neither of which is good for Andy,” Viktor said.

“Where’s Misha?” Sephie asked, before I could.

“I think he’s outside. I’ll go fetch him,” Viktor said. Before he left the room, Sephie added, “Ivan too, please.”

chuckled, causing her to look at me. “You read my mind again, solnishko. I don’t know why it surprises me at this point, but it still occasionally does.”

Misha and Ivan walked into the room, followed by Viktor, Andrei, and Stephen. Misha Immediately looked to me. “Viktor told me. Leaving Andy with Sal is a very bad idea. We have to get him out. It won’t end well for him if we don’t.”

I nodded, not surprised in the least at that conclusion. I looked at Viktor, “where is Andy now?”

“He’s laying low, but he’s still in the city. He said Sal is having him watched right now, so he has to be careful,” Viktor said.

I looked between Viktor and Ivan. “How many of you will it take to get him out safely?”

Ivan spoke up. “There’s no way to know without knowing how many guys Sal has on him. It’s completely dependent on that.”

“I made a call already to have someone try to find out how many guys are on Andy.” Viktor said.

“How far is he from the penthouse? Can he get himself there?” Sephie asked.

Viktor shook his head. “I’m not sure. I’m also not sure I want whoever is following him to know he’s going straight to Boss’s building. That’s going to bring extra attention there.”

She smiled sweetly at Viktor. “This is why you’re the Russian security master.” He gave her a half smile and winked at her.

Misha looked at me, “I think it’s better that Andy isn’t obviously linked to us right now. I have a bad feeling about anyone knowing it’s us that gets him out.”

“How do you guys get him out without anyone knowing it’s you then? It’s not like you giants blend into a crowd,” Sephie said. She then added, “and don’t tell me you’re going to ask nicely.”

We all laughed. Ivan said, “we have our ways, princess,” giving her a wink and a coy smile.

We were quiet for a few moments, all contemplating the best course of action. I finally said, “we’ll go back. If he can tell us exactly what Sal is planning, maybe we can stop it before it happens. Viktor, can the pilot be ready to leave this afternoon?

He pulled his phone from his pocket, stepping out of the room to find that answer. I looked to Trino and Martin. “While I ha te to cut this short, it appears we are needed elsewhere.”

They both nodded in understanding. Trino said, “I can keep Anthony and Lorenzo busy as long as possible, but from what my people are saying, those two are starting to get restless. Dario and Massimo haven’t caught on to the game yet. And with everything that Sephie told me, I’m going to enjoy meeting with those two now

Viktor walked back into the room. “We’ll be ready to leave at 4, Boss.”

Chapter One Hundred Sixty-Eight

Adrik

Trino and Martin came with us to the plane. Trino assured me he would keep me informed of Anthony and Lorenzo’s whereabouts, as well as the outcome of the Dario and Massimo situation.

“Jefe, you and Sephie must come to Colombia soon,” Trino said, offering me his hand. I shook it, nodding. He opened his arms. to Sephie. She hugged him as he said, “Miha, I am forever in your debt. I cannot thank you enough.” He kissed both of her checks.

She smiled sweetly at him. “Be careful with Massimo. He’s an evil man.” She tucked herself back into my side, where she fit perfectly. I pulled her close, kissing her temple.

Trino looked at us thoughtfully. “I may have to take you up on your girlfriend vetting services. If you can find me a woman that’s as perfect for me as you are for Jefe…” He didn’t finish his sentence, once again lost in thought.

I chuckled. “It’s 100% worth it, my friend.” Sephie’s wide smile stretched across her face as she looked up at me, causing my heart to skip a beat once again.

Giana was nervously talking on the flight back, just like she was on the flight down. I wasn’t sure if it was because she was nervous to fly or if she was nervous about being around all the guys. I eventually got my answer when I overheard her asking Sephie about her relationship with each of the guys.

“Were you intimidated by them when you first met them? You seem so comfortable with them now and they all call you different nicknames, but you weren’t like intimidated by them when you first met them?” she asked, quietly, but still loud enough that we all heard her question.

Ivan ‘caught my eye, grinning. He said, “Sephie might not know what that word means.” Sephie grinned at him. She couldn’t help but laugh when Giana looked frightened that he had answered her question. Ivan continued, “Sephie put me in my place in her kitchen after knowing me for what, like 12 hours?” He looked at everyone for confirmation.

“If that,” Andrei said.

Giana, her curiosity overtaking her fear, asked, “what happened? How did she put you in your place?”

Ivan laughed. “She was trying to help me and I gave her sh it for it. She gave me more sh it in return and helped me anyway.” He looked to Sephie, a broad smile across his face. I had heard the story of how he tried to intimidate her before she stitched him up and how she didn’t back down. It was the first real glimpse we had of how truly amazing she is. Basically, everyone is scared shitless of Ivan when they meet him and he uses that to his advantage.

“That’s not completely accurate though. I did think you wanted to murder me in my sleep for a few days there,” she said, laughing

“And yet, you still gave us the emotional support sloth,” Misha said, laughing. We all laughed, remembering her antics. Sephie’s cheeks flushed slightly as Giana looked to her for an explanation. She just shrugged her shoulders.

Giana, still curious and trying to be bolder, asked, “how did you get all the nicknames they have for you?”

Misha laughed. “I call her gazelle because she tried to ki ll me the first time I went running with her.” He looked at Giana very seriously. “I almost died. It was very touch and go.”

Andrei spoke next. “I call her spider monkey because she jumps on my back to hitch a ride whenever she can.”

Viktor said, “I call her sestrichka. It’s a term of endearment for a little sister in Russian.”

Ivan said, “princess, because she is the go ddamn princess.” We all laughed.

I added, “solnishko. Because she’s the light to my dark and she lights the way for all of us.” Sephie turned to me, her eyes slightly wide. I could see the tears forming as she got up and came to me, curling up next to me. I pulled her close, kissing her lips.

Ivan and Misha both said, “fu cking adorable.”

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Sephie just grinned at both of them, but then looked to Giana. “Armando is getting his own team of guys set up. You’ll have your own list of nicknames soon.” Giana just looked at her skeptically.

Once we landed, a few of the men that Armando had hired met us at the airport with vehicles. I hadn’t met any of the men Viktor had approved for Armando to hire, but I had complete faith in Viktor’s ability to pick solid men. They weren’t as physically intimidating as my guys, but not many people were. Viktor walked over with one of the men, introducing me and Sephie to him.

“Boss, this is Mike. He’s the head of Armando’s security,” Viktor said.

Mike extended his hand, “nice to meet you, sir. Viktor’s told me great things.”

Sephie elbowed Viktor in the ribs lightly. “He’s the American security master to your Russian security master. Shall we have a Cold War 2.0, gentlemen?”

Sephie always managed to get the loudest laughs out of Viktor. It was always nice to see. Mike looked to her, clearly surprised, but quickly extended his hand to her. “You must be Sephie. Viktor has also told me great things about you.”

She looked to Viktor, “da mmit, am I going to have to be on my best behavior now? Because that’s really going to put a damper on my plans.”

He laughed loudly again, wrapping his giant arm around her shoulders, dwarfing her. He said, in Russian, “don’t worry, sestrichka. He knows you’re a little bit evil, in the best way possible.” Her wide smile stretched across her face as she leaned in closer to him.

She looked back to Mike, who was watching her with an unreadable expression on his face. She glanced around quickly. “Let me know when you have issues with Giana. I’ll run interference.” He looked at her, puzzled.

I put my hand on his shoulder. “Just file it away. She’s never wrong,” giving him a half smile, as we walked to the vehicles.

“Yes, sir,” he said, following us.

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Adrik

As soon as we got to the penthouse, we all met in my office. Armando's men were there, along with all of us. Giana chose to stay behind in the apartment that she now shared with Armando, but Sephie came with us. I think she was curious to meet Armando's new guys, which I was thankful for. I always appreciated her opinion of new people.

Sephie was sitting on the arm of the couch, next to Ivan. I saw her lean down to ask him a question, but she said it quiet enough that no one else could hear. As she asked him the question, I could see the coy smile creep across his face. He caught my eye. In Russian, he said "Sephie brings up a great point that we can use the new guys to get Andy out. Nobody knows them yet. They won't be recognized and it'll also give us a chance to really test them in a real situation."

I found myself feeling proud once again that she was mine. Sephie looked to Misha, a questioning look on her face. He thought for a moment, then nodded.

Mike looked to Armando, somewhat confused, "why do I feel like they just decided on the plan and we're just waiting to hear what it is?"

Sephie looked to Armando, saying something in Italian, which surprised us all. Armando chuckled. She looked at me, saying in Russian, "I told him Viktor makes good choices. That's why he's my giant Russian security master." Viktor winked at her from across the room.

"Gentlemen, we do have a situation where we need to get Andy safely away from Sal's reach. He's got very valuable information that we can use to our advantage. Unfortunately, Sal also knows this, so his people are watching Andy. My guys are all well-known, so it would be obvious if they were to be seen with Andy that he's coming to me. You're all new faces that no one knows yet, so it'll be less obvious that he's coming to us," I said, talking to Mike and the other two guys that Armando had hired, Chris and Keith.

Mike nodded in agreement. "Where is he now? And how many people are watching him? How difficult is this going to be?"

Ivan spoke up, "we're gathering that information now. We've had people watching Andy's last known location since we got the call from Andy earlier today."

"He knows we're watching his watchers, so he's trying to be a little more active than he would normally be in this situation, to help us out," Viktor said. "Communication with him is almost impossible now. He took a big risk contacting us earlier."

"Do you know his location?" Mike asked.

"He has several spots he can move between that are easy for him to defend by himself. I know where each one is. We've sent people to all of them to find out exactly where he is. I expect news soon," Ivan said,

"How is he going to take three strangers coming in after him, though? I agree that nobody knows us, which is a good thing, but this guy doesn't know us either. Depending on how well armed he is, that could be very bad for us," Chris asked.

"That won't be a problem. We've got a code to give you. He'll know you're with us," I said.

"Please tell me it's something rid iculous like "mayonnaise," Sephle said, laughing.

Andrei laughed. "It's not, but I'm going to keep that one in mind for the future,"

"Right? How awesome would it be to break down the door and just yell the name of a random condiment? Mayonnaise! Oh, thank God, they're here to save me," she said, laughing more now,

Right on time. Everyone in the room started to laugh and we all forgot for a few minutes that we were planning a dangerous operation with the potential of not everyone making it back. Armando's men looked surprised at Sephie's random thoughts, but they appreciated the laugh as much as the rest of us. I caught her eye, her wide smile making my heart jump in my chest. I was just about to motion for her to come to me, when she got up and walked toward me, I pushed my chair back and opened my arms for her. She settled in on my lap and held her arms across my arms that were wrapped around her.

Ivan's phone rang. He left the office to take the call, leaving us to wait for news. When he walked back in, I could tell by the look on his face that he did not have good news.

Sephie

"Oh, that's a bad look," I said, as Ivan walked back into the office. I knew Adrik knew what that look meant too, as I felt him tense when he saw Ivan's face.

"We've got a bigger problem, Boss," Ivan said, walking back to the couch. "That was one of the guys in Vito's part of the city. He said they're trying to start a riot, but it's not a normal mob. He said he's seen people on brawn before and he's sure everyone that's out is on it, from what he can tell. The police are responding, but he said they keep getting pushed back."

Adrik started to run his hand up and down my back, like he always did when he was trying to keep himself calm. Armando looked to Adrik, asking, "why Vito's part of the city, though? I thought Vito was with Sal?"

"It doesn't make sense. Maybe something happened, or maybe this is just part of his larger plan. It means we need to get Andy. as quickly as possible to figure out what they're planning. Trino said Anthony and Lorenzo were starting to get restless in Colombia, maybe they're planning on returning and this is the distraction they need to come back," Adrik said.

"Well, unless they've changed this formula again and we don't know about it, the mob will pass out in under an hour. They just need to wait them out," I said.

This time, Viktor's cell phone rang. He walked out of the office to take the call. I looked to Misha, who was clearly running through scenarios in his head. He would get a faraway look in his eyes anytime he was thinking about possible outcomes. I waited to see if he would finish or if Viktor would walk back into the office first.

Viktor won that round. He walked in, saying, "we have Andy's location. He's got at least 7 guys watching him at various points. It's not going to be easy, but it's doable." He looked to Mike. "We can provide backup, as long as we stay out of sight. I know for sure there are at least three guys that Stephen can take out without them seeing anything."

The mood turned very serious, as they planned out Andy's extraction. They decided to take him to a safe house well outside the city first, in the event they were followed. They would get all of the information from him there.

Because Ivan still only had the use of one arm, he was going to stay behind. Andrei was mostly functional again, but still not 100%, which meant he also had to stay behind. Misha, Viktor, and Stephen would go with Mike, Chris, and Keith to get Andy.

I caught Misha as they had finished their planning session. "You're sure this is still a good idea?" I asked, trying not to worry.

His wide smile crept across his boyishly handsome face. He just pulled me to him, kissing the top of my head. "It's still a good idea, gazelle. We'll be fine. As it stands now. The faster we get to Andy, the better, I think."

I wrapped my arms around his waist, sighing. "I don't disagree. I just want you guys to be careful."

"Always," he said, squeezing me to him. He picked me up, spun me around once, then set me back down. "Otherwise, who would be here to constantly annoy you the way I do?" He didn't even give me a chance to answer. He quickly added, "nobody, that's

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who."

"Boring," I said, dramatically.

Chapter One Hundred Seventy

Sephie

They got organized, went over the plan once more, then headed toward the elevator. I felt Ivan's giant arm around my shoulders on one side and Andrei's sizeable frame appear on the other side. "Don't worry, princess. We've done this more than once. Same for Mando's guys. They've all got experience, which is why Viktor gave them the okay," Ivan said.

I sighed. "I know. But I can't help but worry a little bit." I thought for a minute. "How long is this gonna take? Are you guys hungry? Do you want to come upstairs and help me make dinner for when they get back? Cooking helps prevent me from worrying about everything that could go wrong."

They both looked at each other, over the top of my head and said in unison, "Yep."

I laughed. I walked back to the office where Adrik and Armando were still talking. I walked to Adrik, who simply opened his arm for me while he finished his sentence. I sat in his lap once again, waiting for them to finish their conversation before I told him my plan. He kept talking, running his hand up and down my back lightly.

Once they were finished, I looked at both of them. "I'm going upstairs to cook. I'm hungry, so I'm sure everyone else is also hungry and I think the guys will be extra hungry when they get back." I looked to Armando, "you and Giana are welcome to come up and join us. I can make enough to feed this army."

"I'll check with Giana. She was admittedly tired after staying up so late last night and traveling today. She might be asleep by now, for all I know," Armando said.

"No pressure. She probably has a hangover, huh?" I asked.

He smiled and nodded his head. "She did get quite drunk last night after you guys left." He looked somewhat embarrassed at the admission.

"Uh oh. Is she a fun drunk or a mean drunk?" I asked, now curious.

He sighed. "Neither. She's a sappy drunk."

"Ohhhh, that's the worst kind. We're going to have to learn her hard line," I said.

"What's that, solnishko?" Adrik asked, his hand lightly running up my back to the back of my neck, letting his fingers linger just on my hairline where he knew he could drive me crazy. It was innocent enough, but I wasn't expecting it and I was suddenly hit with a warm tingle over my entire body. It took me a second to answer his question.

"It's what Max used to call the number of drinks someone could have before they switched from fun drunk to high maintenance drunk. Hard line for a hard no, don't serve them anymore drinks than this or you're crossing the line into dangerous territory," 1 said, still trying to keep my composure as Adrik kept his hand on the back of my neck. I caught his eye. He knew exactly what he was doing and he was clearly enjoying it.

Armando, thankfully unaware, laughed. "That's very good information to have for the future. I'll pay attention next time."

"Was she drinking the same drink all night or did she switch it up?" I asked, moving so that I was leaning back against Adrik's chest, hoping to make it more difficult for him to reach my neck.

"She kept the same drink for most of the night, but switched it up at the end of the night," Armando said,

"She's complicated. That makes the hard line more difficult to predict. You have to keep her on the same drink to get accurate numbers. Once she switches, the data goes out the window and you have to start over," I said, grabbing Adrik's arms and wrapping them around my waist, trying to safely trap him. Instead, he just discreetly slipped his hands under my shirt, tracing circles on my bare skin. I took a deep breath, trying to maintain control.

Armando laughed again. "Sephie, you always have the most valuable insight."

I smiled at him and shrugged my shoulders. "It's a gift." I thought for a moment, then added, "you know she's very insecure with herself, right? She's a nice girl, but she's worried no one likes her, which ironically makes people not like her. The more you can reassure her that she's great and doesn't need to compare herself to others, the less she'll feel the need to drown her anxieties in alcohol."

Armando looked stunned. "I had no idea. She has no reason to be insecure. She's a beautiful woman. Why would she be insecure?"

"Eh, women are complicated. She has no reason to be insecure, but she doesn't believe that. She's trying to live up to an unrealistic ideal in her head, like most women. She needs to understand that you love her for the her she is right now. Not the her she thinks she needs to be," I said.

He exhaled loudly. "You should seriously start charging for your services."

Andrei said from the doorway, "that's why she's my relationship coach spider monkey."

Once upstairs, I got to work on preparing enough food to feed our small army. Ivan and Andrei helped me while Adrik finished up a few things in his office. Armando had gone to check on Giana and promised to come up at least for a minute, with or without het.

"Viktor is going to be so happy when he gets back," Andrei said, as he was washing a pan I needed to reuse. He turned to look at me, grinning. "He loves it when you cook. I mean, we all do, but he loves it loves it."

I had to laugh. Ivan was sitting at the counter on the island. "Are we starting a bet pool for how long Armando and Giana are going to last, princess? I can go downstairs and get a wh ite board."

I exhaled loudly. "I mean. Yes. We should. But I also think Armando can save it. He's clearly infatuated with her. He's clearly been so since we were in Italy. I noticed the way he looked at her when she first came into his office that day of the meeting with the scummy lawyer. It wouldn't surprise me if she wasn't at all qualified for that job and he hired her anyway, just to be close to her. It doesn't always happen, but sometimes someone else's love is enough to break those dark thought patterns. The bigger question will be whether Armando is strong enough to pull her up or whether she's going to pull him down."

Adrik walked into the kitchen, asking, "who's pulling who?"

Ivan answered. "We were just discussing whether we should start a bet pool on how long Armando and Giana will stay together. Sephie thinks Armando might be able to save it. We can all see that he likely loves her. She said the bigger question is whether he'll pull her up or she'll pull him down."

Adrik walked to me, standing behind me. He gently pulled me back against him as I was standing at the stove, waiting for a sauce to thicken. He moved my hair from my neck, kissing my cheek and lightly brushing my neck with his facial hair. I smiled, knowing he was still enjoying torturing me. He moved beside me, leaning against the counter, so he could look at Andrei and Ivan. "Armando is a strong man, but has always been unlucky with women. He's been married at least twice, I think, and neither lasted very long. He had children with both of them, but it wasn't enough to make it last."

"Children are never the thing that will save a marriage," Ivan said.

I picked the sauce pan I was stirring off the stove and moved it to the center island. "Armando has a bit of a savior complex. 1 mean that in a good way, but it inevitably means he's going to pick damaged people. He wants to fix them. He has to learn that not everyone wants to be saved."

Chapter One Hundred Seventy-One

Sephie

Andrei, done with the dishes, sat next to Ivan. “How did you get to be so accurate at reading people, spider monkey? Like every time you say something about someone, it’s always completely accurate and makes me feel dumb for not noticing it before.”

I smiled at him. “You shouldn’t feel dumb for not noticing these things, Bubba. I always thought I was a weirdo for doing so. You’re the normal one. Most people don’t notice these things.”

Ivan, now curious too, asked, “what were you like as a kid? Like did you drive your mom crazy just constantly diagnosing her?”

I laughed. “No. My mom is probably where I get this from. When I was little, she would teach piano lessons from the living room in our house. I was a quiet kid, so she would always keep me in the room so she could keep an eye on me while she taught. Sometimes I would play with whatever toy I had, but I would soon get bored with that, so I’d watch her interacting with her students. They would get frustrated because they couldn’t get the hang of something and she would always stop the lesson and talk to them about the rest of their life. She knew it was never about piano. It was always something else that was on their mind. Teachers are part psychologists, I think. I guess that’s why I notice the small details about people. It seems so obvious to me because I’ve been doing it for so long. As I got older, I would do my homework in the room that her students would wait in for their lesson. I started to be able to tell when something was off when they walked into the house. As they walked into the living room for their lesson, I would cough to let my mom know they needed to talk. Pretty sure most of her students just thought I was asthmatic or something. I coughed a lot,” I said, laughing.

Adrik crossed his arms across his chest. “Those students probably still have no idea how lucky they were to have your mom as a piano teacher.”

I smiled. “A few of them do. I occasionally run into her former students. They recognize my hair and ask if it’s me. The few I’ve run into told me how she changed their life for the better.”

Ivan’s phone rang in his pocket. He pulled it out, walking away from the kitchen so as not to interrupt our conversation, but we all waited to hear who it was. We were all anxious to hear from Viktor. He walked back quickly, visibly relaxed. “They got Andy and they’re at the safe house. The extra guards were already there, so they’re just finding out everything Andy knows and then they’ll be back. I told him Sephie was cooking, so he’s going to hurry now,” he said, a sly smile across his face.

We all audibly exhaled, relieved that it had went well and was over. “How long does Andy have to stay at the safe house?” I asked.

“Just for a day or two until things quiet down and we know for sure that Sal’s guys didn’t manage to follow him,” Ivan said.

“Then what? He comes here?” I asked.

Ivan nodded his head. “It’s easier to keep him safe here. He can be an asset about other aspects of Sal’s operation as well.”

“He can join Team America with Armando’s guys,” I said, laughing.

Viktor, Misha, and Stephen walked into the penthouse just as I was finishing up dinner. Mike, Chris, and Keith were behind them. Armando hadn’t come up yet, but had sent Adrik a message that he would be up shortly. Giana was asleep and he was finishing up some work he needed to get done, then he’d be up.

“Sephie, that smells like I love you,” Viktor said, his broad smile stretching across his face, as he walked into the kitchen.

“My giant Russian bear of a security master!” I said, running to him. He opened his arms to catch me as I jumped into his arms.

“I’m so happy you’re back safely,” I said to him as he put me down. “It went well?” I asked, moving immediately to Misha and wrapping my arms around his neck.

“It went well. A hiccup or two, but Keith is quick on his feet, so it’s all good,” Viktor said.

“I might be quick on my feet, but it wouldn’t have turned out so well were it not for Stephen,” Keith said. I caught Stephen’s cheeks flush slightly as I hugged him too,

Stephen, were you showing off again?” I asked, hugging him tightly.

He laughed. “Maybe just a little,” he said, putting his hands in his pockets.

“That’s my tiny cared Yoda,” I said, laughing. keith looked at Stephen curiously, but said nothing. I caught Stephen stealing a glance at Keith, but then looking away like he was somewhat shy. I glanced to Adrik, who was also watching the exchange. He nodded discreetly, indicating he had seen it too.

While the guys shoveled the food into their mouths, we discussed what Andy had told everyone about Sal’s plans. Viktor said, “Boss, it’s like we were thinking after we got the info from the guys that attacked Misha and Sephie. But it’s even worse.” He paused to take a bite of food, so Misha picked up, saying, “Sal is planning on causing chaos in every part of the city but his own. He knows the people in his part of the city aren’t happy with him, so he’s killing two birds with one stone in this plan. He’s going to unleash chaos on the rest of the city, but keep his area safe, in an attempt to win back his people.” He paused to take another bite of food, so Stephen finished the plan, “in those parts of the city that belong to bosses that are with him, he’s only distributing the brawn to those who are already users. He’s trying to completely replace the supply of all other drugs in those parts of the city with his new formulation of brawn, so they’re getting it whether they want to or not. However, and this is truly evil, in Armando’s area of the city, he knew he couldn’t get to those dealers without Mando finding out. So, he’s bought the guy at the water district.”

Adrik didn’t say a word, but he pulled his phone out and dialed Armando. “Get up here. Now.” He promptly hung up and placed his phone back in his pocket.

“Did Andy have an idea of how close Sal was to replacing the drug supply? Clearly, he’s already been successful in Vito’s area of the city, since they’re rioting. What about the other areas?” Ivan asked.

“He’s been kept out of the loop somewhat, since Sal was already beginning to suspect him, but he said he had to deliver a package to a warehouse for one of the other guys and he saw the brawn operation. It takes a specific setup to make and he remembered it from when they first started making it years ago. He said the warehouse was full of pallets. But they’re not just making it in pills. They’re shipping it out in powder form too, for those people that prefer snorting or injecting. He said he asked one of the guys at the warehouse why they had powder and the guy told him they’re packaging it to look like other drugs. The dealers are going to sell it like their normal product,” Viktor said. “Andy thinks that the rioting going on in Vito’s area right now is a bit of a test run. He hasn’t started to distribute the brawn, as far as Andy knows, yet.”

“Can you even inject that stuff and expect to live?” I asked. I knew my uncle had taken the pills, but I wasn’t sure if he had ever gotten it into his system via another route.

“It’s very dangerous when you do. You can overdose on it even when you take the pills, but it’s even easier to overdose on it when you try and inject it. He’s going to inevitably kill a lot of people with this plan,” Ivan said.

Armando walked into the penthouse, with Giana. He had a worried look on his face. Adrik skipped the pleasantries, asking right away, “who’s in charge of your water district?”

Chapter One Hundred Seventy-Two

Sephie

He thought for a moment. “A guy named Brian Tucker, if I’m not mistaken. Why? What’s wrong?” he asked.

Adrik looked at him seriously, saying, “Sal’s plan. It’s worse than we originally thought. He got to your water guy and he’s going to try to put the brawn into your water supply. He knew he wouldn’t be able to get to your dealers without you finding out, but he got to Brian somehow.”

“He’s going to do what??” Armando asked, running his hand through his hair.

Ivan said, “this is the chaos they’re trying to create to give cover for Anthony and Lorenzo to come back to the city. In every other area of the city, he’s going through the dealers, replacing their normal supply with his new formulation of brawn. He couldn’t do that in your area of the city, without you finding out, so he went through Brian. How well do you know Brian?”

“Not that well, honestly. I hardly have reason to speak to him. I know I have a file on him at my house. I keep a file on all the city’s employees in my area at the house. I’m not sure I have it with me, though.” He looked to Giana like he was silently asking if she knew whether they had the information with them or not. She looked at him, then at all of us, somewhat bewildered.

Ivan, noticing her fear, did what he does best, saying, “that information is important. We need it as soon as possible.” He said it with an edge to his voice that was clearly meant to intimidate Giana.

She looked like she didn’t know what to say for a moment, but then she looked at Armando and squared her shoulders. “I’ll go check my computer. If we have it, it’s there. I’ll be right back,” she said as she quickly left the penthouse.

I caught Ivan’s eye, raising my eyebrow at him, knowing she had just passed that test. He just smirked at me, winking. Mike, who I was discovering was quite observant of me, noticed our exchange. He gave me a curious look, but said nothing.

“Did Andy have an idea of when they’re going to make this happen?” Armando asked. “If we don’t have the info with us, we can go to the house tonight to get it.”

Viktor shook his head. “No, he’s been kept mostly in the dark on what’s happening because Sal was already suspicious. He happened on the warehouse where they’re making the brawn somewhat by accident. He started asking questions after, to try and get as much information as possible and that’s when Sal really got suspicious of him. That’s when he called us. I’m not sure how much Sal thinks he knows, but he knows Andy knows enough to screw up his plans.”

We were all silent for a moment. “What happens if we can’t find Brian?” I asked no one in particular. They all thought about the question, but nobody could come up with an answer. We sat in silence for a few more minutes, which was impressive given that Armando was with us. “Why not expose Sal’s plan to the people of the city? Not just the people in Mando’s area, but the entire city. Let them know what’s coming, so they can be prepared. Chaos isn’t as chaotic when it’s expected,” I said, thinking out loud.

“Like Trino said, the popular vote goes a long way. If you can expose Sal and the other bosses for what they’re trying to unleash, then the people can help us. It’s not as much of an insurmountable situation when we have the entire city against the few people that are with Sal.”

“Goddammit I love your brain,” Ivan said. “That could work. Hold a press conference outlining all of Sal’s plans, asking the community’s help in trying to find him. Same for Anthony and Lorenzo, if they’ve come back. He ll, same for the other bosses too. Might as well round them all up at once and be done with it.”

“I agree with rounding them all up at once, but I’m not sure I want the entire city to know I’m rounding them up, because I’m going to put a bullet in each of their heads,” Adrik said. I could see the anger oozing out of him at this point. He stood up, to take his plate to the sink and remained standing. I got up as well and walked to him, tucking myself in his side, knowing I could keep him calm. He immediately started to run his hand lightly up and down my back.

“Okay, so don’t reveal who’s behind the plan, but you can still reveal the plan, right? Like warn everyone?” I asked, looking up at him.

He took a deep breath, pulling me into him. I rested my head on his shoulder, trying to at least help to keep him calm so he could think clearly. “I think that’s a good last resort plan of action. I would still prefer to take care of this while the public is still as blissfully unaware as possible. I’ve worked hard to keep the dealings of my organization out of the public eye. I would like to keep it that way, if possible.”

Giana walked back into the kitchen. She still looked frightened, but she had a few printed pages with her. She handed them to Armando, who immediately began reading them. “This is all I have on Brian Tucker in my computer. I haven’t seen the file you have at your house, so I don’t know if that’s everything you have on him or not.”

Armando flipped through the few pages quickly. He looked to Mike as he said, “this isn’t nearly everything. It’s just the most basic information on him. I have much more on him at the house. We’re going to need to go get it.”

Mike nodded, but then suggested that Armando stay at the penthouse and send them instead. “They’re likely watching the building now, after we grabbed Andy. They might take advantage of you leaving tonight.”

“I appreciate the thought, but no one else can get into my safe at my house. It requires my fingerprint as well as my retinal scan,” Armando said.

“Holy Mission Impossible, Batman,” I said, which caused everyone to stop for a moment and laugh. I couldn’t help but enjoy the moment’s break as well. I felt Adrik pull me in front of him, holding me close to him. “I fucking love you,” he said quietly, as he pressed his lips to mine.

Once the moment was over, Adrik, looking serious again, said to Armando, “go get that file. I’m going to call Trino. If they’ve been working on the dealers, he should’ve known. Many of those dealers belong to him, so either they know which dealers are his, or they aren’t working on as big of a scale as we’re thinking.”

Team America, Armando, and Giana promptly left the penthouse. The guys started to help me collect the dishes from around the kitchen. “We should get an actual table at some point. Especially if Team America is going to come over regularly,” I said, thinking out loud.

Misha, his wide smile across his face, said, “you’re becoming very domestic, gazelle. Are you nesting? Isn’t that what pregnant women do?”

I tried to give him my best smile, saying, “that is what pregnant women do, but I will never be a pregnant woman, so there’s that.” I felt Adrik’s arms around me, pulling me to him. Misha knew immediately that he had unknowingly said something he shouldn’t have. His smile faded quickly, looking nothing but apologetic. I said to Adrik as he held me tightly, “it’s okay. I’m okay. They’re going to find out eventually.”

Before I could tell them the story, Ivan said, “the reason Sephie hates doctors as much as me is that we both had things done to us against our will by doctors.”

“Sephie, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to…” Misha said, trying to smooth things over.

I genuinely smiled at him. “It’s okay, my adorable Russian guardian. I can’t be mad at you for something you didn’t know. Mark it down as another reason I’m not completely normal, I guess.”

Viktor looked at me. I could see the tears in his eyes, as he said, “I hate to be relieved about this, Sephie, but I am. My wife was pregnant when she was killed because of me. Ever since you came into our lives, I’ve been terrified of letting that happen again.

Chapter One Hundred Seventy-Three

Viktor

“That is what pregnant women do, but I will never be a pregnant woman, so there’s that,” Sephie said, in response to Misha’s comment about her being pregnant. As soon as she got the words out of her mouth, I felt a huge relief, then promptly felt guilty for feeling that way. Adrik pulled her closer to him, trying to comfort her, but she assured him that she was okay. “They’re going to find out eventually,” she said to him.

Ivan looked at all of us. He had gotten closer to Sephie since the day that Massimo’s men tried to grab her and he ended up in the hospital. He was always protective of her, but that had increased significantly since his time in the hospital. The rest of us weren’t sure what had happened between those two, but we could all plainly see that they shared something the rest of us likely couldn’t understand.

“The reason Sephie hates doctors as much as me is that we both had things done to us against our will by doctors,” he said.

Misha’s face immediately fell. This was going to eat at him for a while. Poor kid was sensitive. Andrei was too, to an extent, but I think he could turn it off better than Misha could. I had a feeling that’s part of the reason Misha enjoyed pissing Sephie off when they sparred. He needed the practice dealing with his emotions in tough situations just as much as she did.

“Sephie, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to…” Misha said to her. Yep, this one is going to stick with him for a while.

She gave him a big smile, trying to let him know that everything was okay. Clearly, Adrik and Ivan knew, but the rest of us had no idea. I suspected this is what happened that night at the house when she got upset and disappeared upstairs. It was obvious that was a rough day for both her and Ivan.

Before I knew I was saying it out loud, I said, “I hate to be relieved about this, Sephie, but I am. My wife was pregnant when she was killed because of me. Ever since you came into our lives, I’ve been terrified of letting that happen again.”

The guys all knew I was married when I first started working for Adrik. They also knew what happened to my wife. My revenge that landed me in a Syrian prison was for my wife. I hadn’t told Sephie yet. It simply hadn’t come up, but I had legitimately been worried about trying to protect her and any children they had in the future. I knew Adrik didn’t care for kids, really, but he was so different with Sephie that I could see him changing his mind easily if she wanted children.

It’s a difficult thing to admit that you’re relieved when someone isn’t able to have children. I felt guilty about admitting it out loud.

Sephie looked at me, not as surprised as I thought she would be, and said, “that’s what landed you in a Syrian prison, isn’t it?”

The other guys just looked at her, with the surprise that I expected from her. I nodded my head. “I ended the cycle of vengeance, but I was so focused on ending it that I got sloppy and got caught.”

“And you’ve been struggling with the guilt ever since she was killed, which is why you pour yourself into making sure we’re all safe, as well as making sure we have everything we need always,” she said.

I could feel the tears welling even more in my eyes. I nodded as she walked toward me. She slid her arm around my shoulders, saying quietly, “Papa Bear, you’re the best security master there is. You take care of everything like no one else and if you decide in the future to give it another try, you’re going to make the most amazing father. In the meantime, you can keep practicing on us.”

I felt the tears fall as I thought about what could have been. My life would look very differently if my wife were still alive. I’m not sure I would be at the same place I’m at now. I’d come to terms with it years ago, but I still had moments where it was almost like I was missing the life that would’ve happened. Even though I didn’t know what it would’ve been like. Or if I still would have been with my wife. We were young and got married probably before either of us were really ready. There are so many what ifs that I used to obsess over. I’d finally come to a point where I put that almost life to rest, but occasionally, like now, I would remember the life that didn’t happen.

Sephie hugged my shoulders tighter, just offering her comfort for a moment. I wrapped my arm around her, pulling her in for a hug, as I tried to get control of myself. “I know you’re still going to worry sometimes, but you can feel confident in knowing that you’re doing a fantastic job of keeping us all safe,” she said.

I’m still not entirely sure how she knows exactly the thing that we all need to hear, at exactly the moment that we need to hear it, but she’s quite possibly psychic. I was so driven to constantly make sure every detail was always taken care of, for fear of something slipping through the cracks and someone getting hurt. Since Sephie had come into our lives, I had many sleepless nights trying to find the holes in my security that allowed the attacks to happen. I was constantly worried about it. Each attack on her was a blow to my confidence. I’d been mentally spiraling out of control because I thought the same fate that had happened to my wife was inevitably going to happen to Sephie and there would be nothing I could do about it.

I tried to hide it the best I could around everyone else, but Sephie notices everything. Of course, she would notice this too.

“I’m beginning to think you’re psychic, sestrichka,” I said, trying to lighten the mood. She kissed my cheek, squeezing my shoulders once more.

“Nah, I’m just that weirdo that notices everything,” she said, giving me her wide smile that always made the room a little brighter whenever I saw it.

“I’m still getting you a crystal ball for Christmas,” I said, smiling at her.

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“YES! I can side hustle the shit out of that. I’ll read your palms too,” she said, throwing her arms up in the air like she’d just. won a prize.

She had impeccable timing with her silliness. She always knew when we needed a break from serious matters and she would always do or say something hilarious to make us all laugh, effectively making us forget for a moment the gravity of a situation.

Chapter One Hundred Seventy-Four

Viktor

She walked back to Adrik, who opened his arm for her to step into. It's like she fit perfectly next to him, like they were made for each other. He kissed her temple pulling her closer. He was so different around Sephie. For the better, really. In his younger days he was more of an as shole to the girls he would date. It always seemed like he was trying to get away from them. He was never outright mean to them, but he never thought about them the way he does Sephie. He's consumed with Sephie.

I knew he was in love that very first night at the restaurant when we walked outside the restaurant to find her after Anthony had smacked her a ss so hard. After Adrik ripped Anthony a new one in front of everyone, he got up and walked to the back of the restaurant. He walked through the kitchen, like he owned the place. One of the cooks tried to stop him, but Adrik just glared at him. He was imposing in his own right. He was just as tall as the rest of us and only slightly smaller. I think he stayed leaner because it was easier to find suits that fit him that way.

As soon as he told Sephie his name, I knew she was the one. He never told anyone his name. He'd had girlfriends that he dated for a year or more that still don't know his name. He knew Sephie for under two hours and he told her his name.

I saw what he saw in her the next morning at her apartment. She was so funny, but so genuinely concerned that we were taken care of, even though her neck was a shade of purple that I'd never seen on a human and she was hoarse from Anthony trying to crush her windpipe. I knew she was special and that Adrik would do whatever it took to keep her around for a very long time. Once he made his mind up on something, there was usually no going back.

We were all grateful that she was in our lives and that he had seen her for who she is right away that night so many months ago. She'd changed him for the better, but she'd also changed all of us. There was no doubt that we would do whatever it took to make sure she was always safe and always looked after, no matter what happened.

Adrik kissed her temple again, then said, "I need to call Trino. I want to see if Anthony and Lorenzo are still down there or if they got tired of waiting and left." He walked away from the kitchen to make his phone call.

Sephie started to wash the dishes from dinner as she asked, "how did it go with Team America? Did they pass the test?"

I chuckled. "They did. Mostly. They're still getting used to working with each other. It takes a while to learn how each guy operates in situations. Stephen really did save Keith's a ss."

She looked to Stephen, her eyebrow raised. He just shrugged his shoulders. "It was an honest mistake, but I fixed it."

"He said the wrong code word, huh? He said mayonnaise instead of whatever code you guys gave him, didn't he?" she said, grinning. Stephen laughed, just shaking his head at her. "So, that's one for Team Russia, zero for Team America because you saved his a ss? I feel like this should make it to the wh ite board, along with the bet pool for Armando and Giana. We should have a running tally of how many times you guys have to save their as ses before they get their sh it together."

More laughter from all of us. Most women would've avoided this conversation. They would've avoided training with us, learning how to defend themselves, learning how to sh oot. Not Sephie. She poured herself into training with us. I laughed to myself as I remembered her telling me early on that the more she trained, the more she could eat. She was starting to get good enough that she killed more of Massimo's guys that day they tried to grab her than the rest of us. It helped me worry about her less. It also made me wish I had taught my wife a few things. She might've had more of a fighting chance.

Adrik walked back into the kitchen. We all looked expectantly at him, wondering what he had found out from Trina. "Trino met with Anthony and Lorenzo today, just to keep them down there a little longer, to help us out. He tried to get more information out of them on what their plan is, as well. Dario and Massimo are still waiting, but he assured me Massimo will no longer be a problem once he meets with him."

"What other info did he get from Tony and Enzo?" Ivan asked.

"We have time. Not much time, but we have time. They're still working on producing enough brawn to completely replace the supply. Then they have to distribute it. They conveniently left out the part where they were replacing the entire supply with it when talking to Trino. Many of the dealers in the city are loyal to him. That's how he gets his information on the bosses. He's making calls to find out if they've been approached or not," Adrik said.

"What if they're just going to replace the product and not tell the dealers? Maybe they don't know. Didn't Andy say they were trying to package it like other drugs?" Sephie asked. She was a smart girl, who caught on very quickly. It used to surprise me in the beginning that she could catch on as quickly as she does, but now I've come to expect it from her. Adrik walked back to her, standing beside her as she continued to clean up from dinner. We all noticed how he couldn't stand to be apart from her. It was like there was an imaginary force pulling them to each other at all times. He had to he next to her, but he was also fine with her goofing around with all of us. It was like they were in orbit around each other. Each one could leave, but they always came back to each other. He was always confident she would come back to him, so he never minded when she would leave to show affection to one of us.

"That's a possibility. Trino said he would check with his dealers and get back to me as soon as he knew something," Adrik said. She turned the water in the sink off, grabbing a towel to dry her hands as she moved closer to him.

She looked lost in thought for a moment, then grinned and looked at Ivan. "We also need to add potential outcomes for Dario and Massimo to the wh ite board. I vote on some dramatic ending for Massimo, like Trino lights him on fire and throws him off a cliff. I feel like Trino has a flair for the dramatic."

Once again, we were all laughing in the kitchen as we were discussing very serious, life-threatening topics.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 175

Chapter One Hundred Seventy-Five

Viktor

We were still laughing and joking, throwing out possible horrific outcomes for Massimo when Armando came back with Giana and his men. He had a much larger file in his hands than what Giana had come upstairs with earlier.

“Any problems?” I asked Mike as they all walked to the kitchen.

He shook his head no. “We didn’t notice anyone following, even. Either they stayed very discreet, or they have no idea we’re the ones that took Andy tonight.”

Armando walked to Ivan and handed him the substantial file he had on Brian. Ivan immediately got to work looking through the pages. One of Ivan’s greatest strengths was finding a person’s weakness. He almost had a sixth sense about it. It was partly why most of Adrik’s former girlfriends always hated him. We knew they wouldn’t last long if Ivan could make them mad. He had a way of uncovering a person’s true nature.

It was one more reason we all knew Sephie was special. She never once changed around him. Misha said she was initially scared of him when she first saw him in her kitchen, but she was initially scared of Misha too. She was expecting me and Andrei when she woke up, not Ivan and Misha. That fear was completely gone when he came back and she noticed he was hurt. She was determined to help him, even though he didn’t make it easy for her.

Sephie, always curious, walked to Ivan. She stood behind him, reading over his shoulder as he flipped through the file. If anybody could find how they got to him, those two could.

We were all quietly waiting for them to find the answer we needed. I watched as they both came to the same conclusion, at the same time. She looked at him while he said to her, in Russian, “that has to be it.” She nodded her head in agreement, Ivan looked up, finally noticing all of us watching him. “Brian has a sister. Single mom, struggling financially. Her kid was just diagnosed with a rare form of cancer. I would bet good money that Sal is offering to pay for the kid’s medical treatments in exchange for access to the water system. It looks like Brian has been supporting her financially for a while.”

As he talked, Sephie continued to look through the pages over his shoulder. She was leaned over his back, reaching over his shoulder flipping the pages like that’s exactly where she was supposed to be.

“So, do I fire the guy? I can’t fire the guy if he’s supporting his sick nephew,” Armando said, clearly worried about this situation.

I looked to Misha, who had that faraway look in his eye that meant he was running through scenarios in his head. His gut instinct was unparalleled. He was right about our plan at the ball. He was the only one that was right about that plan. He also saved all of us by keeping us from going to Armando’s office when we were in Italy. We were reliant on his gut instinct now. Just as he made a face that I knew meant something was off, I heard Sephie say, “sh it” under her breath.

We all looked to her, as she looked to Misha, looking for confirmation of what she’d just discovered. She saw the look on his face. “Double sh it,” she said. We all knew this was not good, but Armando’s guys were a little clueless.

“Care to expand on what ‘sh it” and “double sh it’ actually mean?” Mike asked.

Ivan glanced at him, a serious expression on his face, that caused Mike to add a “please” to his question. Sephie didn’t see Ivan’s expression, but she knew it had happened. She just wrapped one arm around his shoulders, as she answered Mike. “The father of Brian’s nephew is none other than Anthony.”

None of us were expecting that answer. She looked to Adrik, a puzzled look on her face. “Didn’t you tell me Sal had given you some bracelet with a tracker in it when you banished Anthony? Andy told you it was for a former girlfriend, right? One that Anthony was suspecting of cheating?”

Adrik nodded. We were all putting the pieces together. “I think we found the cheating girlfriend,” he said.

“In her defense. I’d cheat on that, too. I’m honestly impressed she even got pregnant,” Sephie said. It was a funny statement, but we all recognized that edge to her voice. She was getting angry.

Mike, still not completely connecting the dots, asked, “what does that mean?”

We’d all heard about her revelation about Anthony when they were talking to Trino and Martin, so we were all trying not to laugh. We all looked to Sephie, who stared at all of us, clearly not amused with us forcing her to say it one more time.

“You’re all going to pay for making me say this out loud yet again,” she said, glaring at all of us. She sighed, then looked to Mike. “Anthony has a tiny d ick, which he felt the need to press against me when he was choking me in the hallway of the restaurant I used to work at.” Ivan reached up and held onto her arm that was still wrapped around his shoulders, trying to comfort her.

Mike looked surprised. “Okay, I’m going to need to hear that story at some point. But why is she financially struggling if she’s got his kid? Cheater or not, that’s still his kid, right?”

Adrik said, seriously, “you don’t know Anthony.” Sephie kissed Ivan’s cheek, then walked back to Adrik, tucking herself into his side as he wrapped his arm around her.

“He’s right. Anthony is…. Well, he’s a bit of a psycho. He gets off on inflicting pain on others. One of the things he said to me as he was choking me was that he loves it when they fight back. It’s likely why he got into the flesh trade, as well. It gives him a sense of power to determine someone else’s fate. The change in finances for the mother of his child is likely from Sal, not Anthony. And is only happening so they can have access to the water in Armando’s part of town,” she said.

“Or Lorenzo. Sal seems to make excuses for Anthony. He might even be scared of his own son,” I said, remembering the meeting that Adrik had with Sal when he banished Anthony.

“Would Andy have more insight into that dynamic?” Sephie asked.

I nodded my head. “Likely. We’ll keep him at the safe house through tomorrow for sure. If there’s no one lurking around the building, it might be safe to move him here sooner than we originally thought.”

Adrik looked at me, seriously. “Sephie meets him when he moves here. We need to know we can trust him.”

“Agreed,” I said.

Mike looked surprised. “Why does that matter? I mean no disrespect, of course. You’re obviously a smart girl. Are you a human lie detector or something?”

She smiled at him, but it was a tight smile, shrugging her shoulders. “More or less.”

Armando interjected, “Sephie’s observation skills are next level. I’m going…”

She cut him off, “he knows, Mando. He’s observant in his own right. He’s just confused as to why I have so much input when I’m just the girlfriend.” She crossed her arms across her chest, almost daring him to argue with her.

He stammered for a moment, trying to find the words to say. She saw that she essentially had him on the ropes, so she went in for the kill, taking a few steps toward him. “You thought when I said to let me know when you have problems with Giana at the airport that I meant she was going to be the problem, didn’t you?” She chuckled. “It’s because you have a hard time with women in any kind of an authority position. We can discuss what happened to make you this way at a later time, but I told you to let me know when you had problems with her so I could tell her how to handle it, not you. You see, Mike, I can read people like a book, so yes, as a matter of fact, I am the deciding factor on whether Andy is trustworthy or not. Anymore questions?”

We were all trying to hold in our laughter, as we watched Mike’s face turn even more red than Sephie’s hair. He wasn’t going to live this one down for a while. I glanced at Giana, who was completely shocked at this revelation. Given Mike’s reaction, we all knew that she was right. She had called him out and he wasn’t sure how to handle it.

Adrik walked behind Sephie and put his hand on her waist. He looked at Mike, with every ounce of intimidation he had in him. “That’s the first and last time you will question either my decisions or Sephie. Understood?”

Mike nodded his head, “yes, sir.”

Ivan laughed and said to us, in Russian, “make that two for our team, zero for their team.” We couldn’t help but laugh as Armando and his guys looked at us, confused.

We were definitely getting that white board set up. Sephie might have to learn how to read Russian before this was all over with.

Chapter One Hundred Seventy-Six

Sephie

While I felt slightly bad for calling Mike out in front of everyone, it was also needed. The longer he went without being checked, the more he would question anything related to me, and in turn, anything related to Giana. While I could stick up for myself, she would struggle with that. I saw her shocked expression, along with Armando's, after I called him out.

Once we were all done laughing at Ivan's comment, I said to Giana, in broken Italian, "don't worry, he'll likely do an even better job now, just to prove me wrong." I smiled at her. Armando winked at me, telling Giana in Italian that I could understand it, but I didn't speak it very well. It didn't help her shocked expression.

We continued to talk about options for dealing with Brian from the water department for a while longer. Mike was noticeably quieter during that conversation. Eventually, we decided to call it a night. Adrik was expecting to hear from Trino the following morning, after he had time to get in touch with most of his dealers in the city to find out what, if anything, they knew about Sal's plan.

Team America, Armando, and Giana left while all the guys stayed for a few more minutes in the penthouse. As soon as the door closed and they had enough time to get on the elevator, the guys all died laughing like little kids that had been forced to hold it in during some serious event.

"I didn't think a man's cheeks could turn that red," Andrei said, wiping tears from his eyes from laughing so hard.

Adrik, gaining control of himself, turned me to face him. "Is he going to continue to be a problem? Should I have Armando get rid of him?"

"I don't think so. That's what I told Giana. I said he would likely do an even better job and be nicer to her now, just to prove me wrong. Most guys like that push until someone pushes back. That's what I get from him. He's not a dick, I don't think. He's just a tester. He needs to know his limits. Now that he knows, we'll likely never have to have that conversation again," I said, smiling at the genuine concern on his face at the thought of Mike becoming a problem. I had to admit that I adored the side of Adrik that wanted to destroy anything he deemed to be a threat to me.

Ivan looked at Adrik, a serious expression on his face. "We'll keep an eye on him. If he needs to be checked a little more forcefully next time, I'm happy to do so."

I turned to look at Ivan, grinning. "Add it to the white board!" I said, causing another round of laughter from everyone,

Viktor said, "we're going to need a bigger white board. I'll have someone get a giant one. We're going to have to teach you how to read Russian now too, sestrichka."

"Challenge accepted," I said, smiling at him.

Once the guys all went back to their apartments for the evening, Adrik pulled me closer to him, his hands finding their way underneath my shirt. He ran his hands lightly over my bare skin. He had a slight smirk on his face, but just looked at me for a moment, without saying a word. I raised an eyebrow, looking at him questioningly. He started playing with the curls around my face as he continued to look at me thoughtfully. "You know you're not just the girlfriend, right?" he finally asked.

I smiled at him, unable to contain my laughter. "Of course, I know, I said that to illustrate my point, not because I think that."

He continued to play with the curls around my face as he looked like he was lost in thought. Instead of telling me what he was thinking, he simply leaned down and kissed me.

I woke up sometime during the night, under the covers, which meant that Adrik had gotten out of bed. He rarely got up at night, so I knew something wasn't right. I walked down the hallway toward the kitchen and living room and saw him standing at the windows, looking over the city. He hadn't seen me come down the hallway, so I knew he was lost in thought.

"Is it time for triple strength tea?" I asked as I wrapped my arms around him from behind, resting my head between his shoulder blades.

"I'm sorry I woke you, solnishko," he said as his arms covered mine.

"Technically, it was your absence that woke me. Having trouble getting your brain to shut off?"

He sighed, but didn't respond right away. He's struggling with whatever it is. I walked in front of him, putting his arms around my waist and placing my hands on his bare chest. He looked down at me, his blue eyes looked troubled. For a moment, I searched his eyes, trying to find what it was that was bothering him. Since he'd figured out my trick, he was more open with me whenever I would try to "read" him. I think he enjoyed it, honestly.

"You're worried you're going to turn into your father, aren't you?" I asked.

He chuckled, giving me a half smile. "One day you're going to have to tell me how you do that."

"It works best on you. Everyone else is my best guess. You're the only one I'm sure of," I said. I ran my fingers lightly through his facial hair trying to get him to relax. He closed his eyes and leaned into my touch. "You're not your father. I don't know the man, but I've heard plenty of stories. You're nothing like him."

He opened his eyes. His gaze was intense. "You only say that because you haven't seen the side of me that emulates my father. Since I met you, it's like that part of me went to sleep. Especially after what happened after the ball." He closed his eyes again, his voice cracking as he continued, "I was so terrified that I had lost you and it was all my fault. That part of me, the part that seeks revenge and won't stop until it's finished, it just vanished." He sighed. "Until now."

"Adrik, look at me," I said. His eyes opened again. I could see the rage just below the surface, but I could also plainly see he was afraid. He looked at me like he was searching for what I was always scared I would find. "I know that part of you exists. Even though you say it's been asleep, it's still there. Honestly? It's one of the countless things I love about you." He looked at me, puzzled. "Because in the back of my mind, I know without a shadow of a doubt, that if something were to happen and anyone did manage to get to me, you would not stop coming for me. You would burn this city to the ground if it meant getting me back." I saw his smirk start to creep across his face as he knew I was right. I couldn't help but smile at him. I reached up. placing my palm against his cheek. "Everyone has darkness in them, Adrik. It's what you choose to do with it that matters." I stood on my toes to kiss him gently. "This situation with the other bosses is going to mean that a lot of people could potentially die. If waking up that side of you that seeks vengeance against the other bosses means that a lot of people don't die, I fail to see how that's a bad thing."

He looked at me, his eyes now a little softer, but there was still worry there. He played with my curls around my face. He looked like he was trying to find the right words to say. We stayed like that for a moment, with him struggling against his own thoughts.

I finally said, "you can't have light without dark, Adrik. The brighter your light, the darker your shadows. You're so focused on your darkness that you fail to see how brightly your light shines, but you're what saved me when my darkness threatened to consume me. Your light was the spark I needed to remember my own light. Darkness will always be here. In everyone. Waiting for the light." I could still see the slightest bit of uncertainty in his eyes. "I will always be here. Waiting for you."

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Chapter 177

Chapter One Hundred Seventy-Seven

Sephie

He leaned down, his face buried in my neck, wrapping his arms tightly around me. He clung to me, almost desperately, for several minutes. I finally felt his body start to relax as he stood up. When he looked at me this time, his eyes were the soft blue I was accustomed to, with maybe a hint of rage just under the surface. He resumed his battle with my curls, that s**y smirk reappearing on his face. “Ivan isn’t the only one that’s wise beyond his years. I think you showed him how it’s done and just don’t want to take credit for it,” he said, smiling at me.

I laughed. “That’s the great misconception of life, that years make you wise. Trauma makes you wise. Hardship makes you wise. I’ve met some old people who never faced any adversity in their entire lives and they were f**king stupid.”

He smiled. “Diamonds are formed under pressure, as they say.”

“I wouldn’t go so far as to compare myself to a diamond. Do they have black diamonds? Maybe that. You know, to match my soul,” I said, grinning at him. He looked at me, his s**y smirk on his face, but still like he was lost in thought.

“I’m not entirely sure what I’ve done to deserve you, but I’m grateful for it. I can’t imagine my life without you in it,” he said as he pressed his lips to mine. I pressed my body to his, needing him to know how much I loved him. To know how I had been waiting my entire life for him. To know that my life was incomplete without him in it. To know that I would always be by his side. No matter what.

His desperation from earlier returned, tenfold. He pulled me to him, almost forcefully. His hands frantically pulled his shirt off me. Before I knew it, he’d ripped my panties off too. It never failed to make me giggle when he did it. I pulled at the drawstring of his pants, letting them fall to the floor. He walked backward toward one of the couches, pulling me with him, his lips never leaving mine. His kiss was passionate and unrelenting.

He sat on the couch, pulling me onto his lap. His strong arms were holding me tightly, like he didn’t want there to be any unnecessary space between us. He held me up so he could position himself. I might’ve been on top, but he was definitely in control. He pushed me down slowly onto him, enjoying the look of extreme pleasure on my face every time he entered me. I couldn’t help but moan every time, which turned him on even more. This time was no different. He stilled for a moment, his breaths were fast and heavy against my neck.

His hands ran up my back, rougher than usual, but I found myself loving it. One hand stayed on the back of my neck, just at the point of my hairline. Where I couldn’t react earlier when he did it, I was free to show him just how much I loved it when his hand was there now. I moaned loudly, leaning my head back into his hand. His lips found my neck, kissing me roughly, then biting in the spots he knew drove me crazy. I started to slowly grind my hips against him, loving how deep he could go when I was in his lap. He wrapped one arm around my hips, pushing me down further on him. I gasped, my body exploding in nothing but pleasure.

I couldn’t help but get completely lost in the feeling as he drove his hips into me. I leaned back, using my hands to brace against his knees, while I kept grinding against him. He kept one hand on my hips, the other roaming over my body. I could feel the warmth from his hand over my entire body, like he was leaving a trail of fire wherever he touched. His hand ran up my stomach to the space between my breasts. He lingered, just over my heart, and 1 felt my body explode into-an o*gasm like I had never felt before. My entire body was on fire in the best way possible. I was thankful there were no neighbors to hear my passionate moans as I rode out the intense pleasure.

Of course, Adrik knew just what to do to make my o*gasm last as long as possible, I had no idea how he could do that almost every time, but I loved it. It was so intense that I almost couldn’t handle it. Just when I thought I was done, he would thrust hard into me and my body would respond with another wave of pleasure. I could feel him building. I knew my extended o*gasms would always push him over the edge as well. He went to move his hand from my chest, but I caught it and put it back, holding my hand over his while I felt another wave of pleasure coming on. I bit my bottom lip, completely lost in the feeling, as I looked at him. He cursed under his breath as he saw me bite my bottom lip and I knew it was his undoing. His deep blue eyes darkened as he watched me. I held his gaze, knowing he was close. His breath got louder and he pulled me down on him harder. My lips crashed into his, as he wrapped both arms around me, his rhythm increasing. I matched his movements, trying to make his o*gasm just as intense as what he’d just done to me. He broke the kiss, needing air. “F**k, Sephie. I can’t get enough of you.”

In one quick motion, he had me on my back on the couch. He h**ked his arm under one of my knees, pulling it up to my shoulder. He was driving into me, fast and hard, and I loved every second of it. I wrapped my arms around his neck, completely surrendering to him. I felt myself building again and I knew he was trying to make me o*gasm one more time before he did. I crashed over the edge, unable to quiet my loud cries of pleasure as he exploded in his own o*gasm.

We were both sweaty and breathing heavy. He collapsed on top of me as I wrapped my arms and legs around him, trying to catch my breath.

“I’m going to make you get a soundproof door so I can continue to look the guards outside in the eyes,” I said, laughing. My hands ran lightly over the back of his neck and through his hair.

He didn’t even lift his head, but he laughed. “I secretly love that they can hear you, solnishko. Because while many men want to make you sound like that, I’m the only one that actually can.” He ran his hand down my thigh and squeezed my ass, causing me to squeal. “It’s a bit of a turn on for me, if I’m being honest.”

“So, you’re telling me I shouldn’t be trying to stay quiet when we’re out here or in the kitchen?”

He lifted his head to look at me, clearly curious. “You were trying to be quiet?”

“Not at the end there. You f**ked it out of me,” I said, grinning at him.

He s**y smile stretched across his face, his blue eyes smiling at me. “I love you, Sephie. Always and forever.”

“And I love you, Adrik. Always and forever,” I said as he moved beside me, pulling me to him. He moved my leg over his, wrapping his arms around me. I always felt so safe and warm in his arms that I knew I would be asleep in a matter of minutes. I moaned quietly as I snuggled closer to him, his arms squeezing me just a little tighter, protecting me even while I slept

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Chapter 178

Chapter One Hundred Seventy-Eight

Adrik

I woke the next morning, still tangled up with Sephie on the couch. The first light of the morning was beginning to come in the windows. She had her face buried in my chest; she was still sleeping in darkness. I ran my hand lightly through her hair. She didn't stir, which meant she was extra tired. I was in a predicament, however. I couldn't leave her naked on the couch and send one of the guys up to wait for her to wake up. She always woke up right after I did, unless she was exhausted. I hated to wake her now, knowing she needed the sleep. It was still early, so I chose to stay on the couch with her for a little while longer. Maybe she would wake on her own…

I spent time just holding her, thinking of how lucky I was to have her. She always found a new way to make me fall even more in love with her. Our conversation last night was one such way. She was insanely good at reading me. I think Viktor was right. She's a little bit psychic.

My mind replayed the conversation from the night before, still in awe of her words to me. She was so sure of the good she saw in me that it made me believe her. She was so adept at seeing everyone else for who they truly were, why would I be any different? Maybe she did see something in me that I couldn't see in myself.

"I will always be here. Waiting for you."

almost the same reaction to those words as I did the first time she told me she loved me. With everything that was going on with having her meet Trino, finding out more details about Sal's plan, along with watching her stand up to Mike, I was worried that she was going to reconsider wanting to be with me if she saw the side of me that really could burn the city to the ground to teach the other bosses a lesson. She was such an incredible woman. And the best part was that I think we were only just now beginning to see glimpses of what she was truly capable of. There was more in there that she hadn't discovered yet. I was fearful that she would change her mind after seeing my dark side fully exposed.

Of course, she knew my dark side was there, even though it had been quiet since meeting her. She notices everything. Of course she noticed it. And she loves me more because of it.

I inhaled deeply. I felt her snuggle into me more, making her cooing noises when she was happily sleeping. I held her tightly for a few more minutes. I would give anything to stay on the couch with her for the entire day, but I needed to speak to Trino this morning.

I carefully got up from the couch and picked her up, I was sure she would wake up when I moved her, but as soon as I placed her on the bed, she rolled over and curled up, still sound asleep. I covered her up, knowing she would know I was gone when she woke up with the covers on her. I got ready as quietly as I could, but still secretly hoped she would wake up.

I left her a note, as usual, and closed the blinds part of the way in the bedroom so she could sleep as long as she needed. It seemed like she needed a day every so often to sleep until noon. I wished I could stay with her.

I met Viktor and Ivan in my office. Both were surprised, as usual, that Sephie wasn't with me. "I might've kept her up too late last night. She didn't wake up this morning when I got up."

They both looked at me, smirking. Viktor pulled his phone from his pocket, typed in a message, then put it back. He knew the routine and was already sending one of the guys up to wait on her to wake up. On paper, it seemed like such a silly thing to do. She was protected up there. No one could get to that floor without my approval and there were two armed guards posted outside my door always. But I still needed to know that one of the guys would be there when she woke up, if I couldn't.

I looked to Ivan. "Do you know any jewelers in the city?"

His coy smile crept across his face. "Depends on what you're looking for, but I know of a couple that might fit the bill."

"I want a ring designed for Sephie," I said as I looked at both of them. I walked to my desk. "Close the door." They both looked at me, surprised, I only ever asked for the door to be shut on very serious matters. Viktor closed the door, then they both sat down in front of my desk.

"What's going on, Boss?" Ivan asked. "Did something happen last night?" He had a look of worry on his face, but I could also see his temper just under the surface. He had become extremely protective of Sephie since he was in the hospital. I think he would take me out if he thought I had wronged her. I couldn't help but smile.

"No. Well, yes. I couldn't sleep last night, so I got up. I thought maybe pacing around the penthouse would make me relax enough I could go back to sleep. I've been worried that she'll look at me differently if she sees the other side of me. The side that my father used as his personal assassin when I was younger. It's why I've been hesitant to really put an end to this whole situation with the bosses," I said, sitting in my chair. I ran my hand through my hair. "Ever since the ball and how horribly that plan turned out, I've been terrified of losing her."

Ivan spoke first. "Um, Boss, I'm fairly certain she knows that side of you exists already."

I laughed, looking at Viktor. "I think you were right last night when you said she might be psychic. I haven't said a word to her about my father or that I was worried about turning into him. She nailed it after 30 seconds of looking at me in the middle of the night. And then, of course, proceeded to tell me exactly what I needed to hear." They both smiled, knowing how spot on she could be when it really counted. I sighed. "In the course of that conversation, I got an idea of the ring I want to give her. I have a rough sketch in my head, but I need to talk to a jeweler to see if it's possible."

"Usually, anything is possible for the right price," Viktor said with a smile on his face.

Ivan, now curious, asked, "what's the idea?"

"I compared her to a diamond, but she said she would only compare herself to a diamond if it were black. She said to match her soul. We all know she has the whitest soul of anyone on the planet, but it's still funny." I grabbed a pen and roughly sketched out my thoughts to show them. "One large black diamond, like her soul, with five smaller diamonds surrounding it, since you're all basically a package deal."

Ivan chuckled. "Make the smaller ones red." I raised an eyebrow at him. I liked the idea, but I wanted to know his reasoning behind it. He laughed again, "I can't tell you that without sounding like a completely crazy person to you both, but just trust me. Figure out a way to work in smaller red and even white diamonds. She'll get it."

I nodded my head. I knew he and Sephie shared something that the rest of us couldn't necessarily understand. I didn't need to know everything. Just knowing it would make her happy was all I needed to know.

"You can find someone that can work this out?" I asked Ivan.

He nodded his head. "Right away."

My phone rang. I looked at the caller ID. It was Trino. I put him on speaker, so they could hear the conversation as well. "Trino, what did you find?

Chapter One Hundred Seventy-Nine

Adrik

“Jefe, none of my dealers know anything about this. Either they’re planning on replacing the supply without telling the dealers or they know which dealers are mine and have avoided telling them. Do you have any other dealers that you can talk to without raising too much suspicion?” he asked.

I looked to both Viktor and Ivan. Neither had an answer right away. “We’ll find someone,” I said. “What about Anthony and Lorenzo? Still there?”

“Si, Jefe. They’ve got a renewed sense of hope since I met with them yesterday,” he said, laughing. “Now that they know you’re alive, they’re being slightly more aggressive with their offer. It still doesn’t come close to yours, but it’s fun to make them work for this.”

“What about Dario and Massimo?”

He was quiet for a moment. “Jefe. Your woman is a gift from the angels.” He paused. “She was exactly right about both of them. I think Dario might need a psych ward before this is all over. I met with them separately. I told them both that I knew they had my nephew killed. Dario immediately went on the defense, telling me everything he knew about what happened, where they dumped him, and he threw Massimo all the way under the bus. I’ve seen fear before, but that man is terrified of Massimo. Dario asked me if I could protect him. There’s something deeper there.”

“Feel free to find out as much as you can on what else Dario knows. What did Massimo do when you told him?”

He laughed. “He threw Dario under the bus and tried to blame everything on him. Sephie was right. He is a truly evil man. He kept his cool during the entire conversation.”

“Did you happen to notice that he never blinks when he’s talking to you?”

“I did notice that. He maintains eye contact like he’s trying to send you messages telepathically,” Trino said, laughing.

“That’s his tell for when he’s lying. Sephie picked up on all their tells during the meetings they used to have at the restaurant. Dario will repeat the question back to you when he’s lying, like he’s trying to buy himself time to answer. Massimo never blinks.”

Trino cursed in Spanish. “Jefe, how did you find her? I need a woman like her by my side. I’m going to take her up on her offer,” he said, laughing.

“She amazes me, even still. I constantly question what I did to deserve her,” I said, “What’s your plan for Massimo?”

“I haven’t completely decided. I might light him on fire and throw him off a cliff. I have them separated and heavily guarded for now. I sent that woman that’s with Massimo home. I’ve had the house fumigated twice now and we can still smell her,” Trino said, the disgust apparent in his voice.

We all looked at each other, completely surprised and trying not to laugh. Viktor said quietly, “Sephie is going to love this.”

*Trino, I’ll find a dealer to talk to and let you know what I find out. All your guys are aware of what’s being planned now, correct?”

“Si, Jefe. I talked to all of them personally, but I told them to keep it between our network for now. They don’t have much contact with the other dealers anyway, but I didn’t think you wanted it getting out just yet that we know what’s going on.”

“You’re right, I don’t. Thank you, Trino. And if you do light Massimo on fire and throw him off a cliff, maybe get video. I’d like

to see that.”

Laughter on the other end of the line. “I will.”

“I’ll let you know what I find out on my end. Keep me posted on Tony, Enzo, and Dario.”

Of course, Jefe.”

As I ended the call, we all erupted in laughter. “How?? How does she know these things??” Viktor asked.

“We’re getting that wh ite board today,” Ivan said, still laughing.

“Have flowers sent to the penthouse too,” I said.

Viktor nodded. “As appreciation for not smelling like Vanessa?”

“Exactly.”

They both laughed. Viktor said, “I’ll make sure they’re there before she wakes up. I can’t wait to see her face when she hears what Trino said. She’s not a little bit psychic. She’s a lot psychic.”

I busied myself with the pile of work on my desk. I had a few short meetings that morning that went quickly. Before I knew it, it was early afternoon. Just as I looked up, wondering to myself whether Sephie was awake yet or not, she walked into my office. Her smile lit the room.

She walked to my desk, as I pushed my chair back. Instead of climbing in my lap, she gathered the papers that I was working on and put them aside. She sat on my desk in front of me, pulling my chair back toward her. It was a surprisingly hot move. She was above me now. She leaned down, placing her hands on either side of my face as she pressed her lips to mine. The kiss started sweetly, but I could feel her struggling to control herself. She clearly lost the battle as she deepened the kiss. I felt her hook her feet around the back of my chair, pulling it as close to the desk, and her, as she could. I sat up straighter, sliding my hands up her thighs. I grabbed her a ss, pulling her toward me as she laughed against my lips. She kissed me passionately, making my mind return to the night before with her on the couch. Now, I was the one struggling to control myself.

She stopped the kiss, looking at me briefly, then pressing her lips to mine one more time. She smiled at me, making my heart threaten to stop. “Hi,” she said, breathlessly.

“I’m very glad you’re awake now, solnishko,” I said, returning her smile.

“Have I mentioned that I love you even more for letting me sleep longer occasionally?” she asked as she ran her fingers through my short facial hair.

“You only do it when you need it. It makes me happy that you can. Although it always makes me wish I could stay with you, That’s why I send one of the guys up to wait on you to wake up. If I can’t be there when you wake up, at least I know one of them will be,” I said.

Her smile grew. I found myself lost in her bright eyes. She leaned down and kissed me once more. “Thank you for the flowers. How did you know I’d been missing the gardens at the house?”

I laughed. “I didn’t. I got lucky on that one. The flowers were more in appreciation for not smelling like Vanessa,” I said. I couldn’t help but grin at her.

She laughed. “You must’ve talked to Trino this morning. Is his sense of smell completely gone yet?”

“He said he had the house fumigated twice already and they can still smell her. He sent her home,” I said, laughing at the situation.

“That must mean that he’s talked to Dario and Massimo. How did that go??” she said, her unique eyes wide, but with a hint of wickedness.

I couldn’t answer for laughing. “Wait, Viktor and Ivan need to see this.” I grabbed my phone, calling Viktor and telling him to bring Ivan to the office right away.

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Chapter 180

Chapter One Hundred Eighty

Adrik

“Oh, this must be good. What did he find out from his dealers?” she asked, now curious,

“He spoke with all of his dealers personally, but none of them know about the plan. You might be right in that they’re planning on replacing the supply without letting the dealers know. I need to find a dealer outside of Trino’s network that I can trust to find out if they know anything.” I said.

Viktor, Ivan, Misha, Andrei, and Stephen walked into my office as I was talking. Sephie smiled at all of them, while saying, “I can talk to Chen. You can trust him. He owes me big time, anyway.”

I raised an eyebrow at her. “Who is Chen and why does he owe you?”

“Chen used to live across from Ms. Jackson. He’s a dealer. He’d sell out of his apartment on the weekends. He made sure all his customers were respectful and because they were only there on the weekends, we never said anything about him dealing out of the apartment. When he first moved there, he was living there full-time. He had a girlfriend that lived with him for a while. At the time. Chen had a real job, so he’d be gone during the day on weekdays. I don’t think she worked at all, or at least not during the day, so she was always there. I caught like six different guys leaving his apartment on various days over the course of a couple of weeks. She was either hooking on the side or she’s just a straight up wh ore. Ms. Jackson said she was always in her underwear when the dudes left, so it wasn’t like she was playing video games with these dudes. Chen used to come to the restaurant occasionally after work because I’d hook him up with cheap food. I told him about his girlfriend’s extra-curricular activities.” She paused, clearly remembering the conversation. “He was devastated. He had been planning on asking her to marry him. He had no clue.” She flinched, still caught up in the memory. “It didn’t end well for that girl. I mean, he didn’t ki ll her, but he made sure she ended up with absolutely nothing and sent her on her way. He caught me on my way home a few days later and told me he was forever in my debt for saving him from making that mistake.”

She still looked somewhat troubled. “You’re sure we can trust him, solnishko? You look troubled.”

She smiled, saying, “I’m sure. I was remembering the fight they had that we all clearly heard. I’m admittedly not a fan of yelling. It stuck with me.” I ran my hands over her thighs, feeling the light shaking, knowing she was once again fighting demons. “I don’t know if Chen belongs to Trino or not, but I can talk to him and find out what he knows. He knows other dealers too, so he might know someone that doesn’t belong to Trino. It’s Friday, he’ll be at the apartment, if he still uses that place, that is.”

I looked to Misha. “Your thoughts on her going to that place again?” He thought for a moment, then nodded his head. I looked to Ivan and Viktor. “I don’t care how many guys you think you need, double it.”

She laughed. “We don’t need him to think we’re coming to ki ll him. That might make him run,”

I looked at her, seriously. “Then we’ll find another dealer. I don’t care. Your safety is more important than anything ”

Ivan spoke up. “Don’t worry, princess. We can keep most of the guys out of sight. He won’t even know they’re there.”

She smiled at me. She’d barely taken her eyes off me since she walked into my office. She leaned down and kissed me gently, whispering, “I love you,” against my lips. She used her legs to push my chair back enough that she could stand up. She turned to face the guys, sitting in my lap, wrapping my arms around her waist. “Now. What happened when Trino talked to Dario and Massimo? I could hear her smiling when she asked the question. By the looks on Viktor and Ivan’s faces, I knew she was clearly anxious to hear. Both Ivan and Viktor started laughing.

“This is gonna be so good,” Ivan said, laughing.

“Trino said he met with Dario and Massimo separately and told them both that he knew they had his nephew killed. He said Darin immediately went on the defense and threw Massimo under the bus. He also said Dario asked for Trino’s protection, like he was terrified of Massimo,” Viktor said.

“Didn’t Trino say Dario might need a psych ward after this is over?” I asked. I felt Sephie’s grip on my arms tighten slightly.

Ivan shook his head. “Yep. He said there’s definitely more there between those two. He said that Massimo tried to blame it all on Dario. He also noticed that Massimo didn’t blink once during the entire conversation.”

“So, I asked him what his plans for Massimo were. He said he didn’t know, at first,” I said, laughing. Viktor and Ivan were both trying to hold back their laughter as well. “Then he added that he might light him on fire and throw him off a cliff.”

“Sh ut up,” Sephie said. We were all laughing at this point. “He didn’t really say that, did he?”

“He really said that,” Ivan said. “Me and Viktor were both here for the conversation. Boss put it on speaker. We all heard him.”

“Sh ut up.”

“You’re a lot psychic, sestrichka,” Viktor said.

“I knew he had a flair for the dramatic,” she said, laughing. I wrapped my arms around her tighter as we all laughed.

“We got a giant wh ite board, too. It’ll be here later today,” Ivan added, grinning at her.

“You guys are kind of the best,” she said, sweetly.

Sephie

When I woke up, I was once again under the covers in bed. I knew Adrik had put me back to bed at some point, although I hadn’t a clue when that happened. I would have to ask him if we slept the rest of the night on the couch or if he moved me back to bed after I fell asleep. I stretched my legs out, my joints popping and my muscles gloriously sore from the night before.

I glanced to the table beside the bed, knowing there would be a note. I grabbed the remote for the blinds to open them so I could see without turning on a light. It was just before noon, but the room was dark enough with the blinds partially closed. that it felt like it was early morning.

I got up and turned the shower on, walking to the closet to grab some clothes for the day. I put my unruly hair up into a bun, not wanting to take the time to wash it. The warm water felt amazing on my sore muscles, helping me to wake up.

Once I was ready, I walked out to find out who got to come up to wait for me to wake up. When I walked down the hallway toward the kitchen, I could smell the floral scent. It reminded me of the gardens at the house. I’d been missing them lately. When I got closer to the living room, I could see six different large bouquets of flowers spread across the kitchen and living room. Misha and Andrei were on the couches, talking quietly.

“You guys got me flowers?” I asked, smiling at them. They both gave me their best, most handsome smiles in return.

Chapter One Hundred Eighty-One

Sephie

“There’s one from each of us, spider monkey. You have to figure out who sent which one,” he said, a mischievous grin on his face.

“Challenge accepted, Bubba,” I said, looking over the bouquets.

There was one bouquet with red, white, and black roses. Clearly, that one was from Ivan. One bouquet with roses that were a mixture of pink, orange, and yellow. Andrei. One bouquet with nothing but the deepest blue and purple violets I’d ever seen. Hmmm, this feels like Viktor. One bouquet with bright yellow roses. Misha. One lone orchid. Yep, that’s Stephen. And finally, the largest bouquet of black and red roses. Each rose was both black and red. It was beautiful. Adrik.

I pointed to each bouquet as I said the name of who sent it, as their mouths fell open. “How do you do that, gazelle?” Misha asked.

I laughed. “This one was actually pretty easy. Andrei’s bouquet, for example, are his favorite flower. Of course, he would send that because he’s trying to send a piece of himself to someone he cares about. Your bouquet, my adorable Russian guardian, signifies you take your responsibilities of annoying me as much as possible very seriously, as well as our friendship,” I said as I winked at him.

“What about the other ones?” Andrel asked, now curious.

“Ivan’s is the color scheme. Those three colors are very important to him and I’m the only one that knows why. I almost had Viktor and Stephen’s switched. The violets that Viktor sent are a sign of faithfulness. Of course, my security master would want me to know that. Stephen’s orchid is him. He’s the loner of the group, but orchids are also a symbol of good luck, which is also him, since he’s the one that saves the day from his sniper nest. And finally, the black and red roses are Adrik. He’s worried I will change my mind if he fully shows his dark side, but I told him I love him more because of it last night,” I said, as I sat on the couch next to Andrei.

Both Andrei and Misha were still surprised, but smiling at me. “You’re wicked smart, spider monkey,” Andrei said, pulling me into a hug.

“The other guys are going to be slightly disappointed it didn’t take you longer to figure it out,” Misha said, laughing.

“We can tell them they stumped me for at least five minutes. I mean, I don’t want to shatter anyone’s confidence here.” I smiled to myself, loving the thought that they put into such a sweet gesture for me. “And thank you, for making the place smell uh-mazing. It’s one of the things I miss about the house when we’re not there.”

“Once these flowers are gone, we’ll go back to the house so you can enjoy the gardens there,” Misha said, winking at me. I couldn’t help but smile at him and how much they catered to everything I loved and wanted.

“What’s Adrik’s schedule today? Is he super busy?” I asked.

Not super busy. He should be finishing up the last meeting of the morning by now, but you know you can always Interrupt his meetings if you want to, spider monkey,” Andrel said,

“Maybe I will. I am the goddamn princess, after all,” I said, as I stood up. I grabbed Andrel’s hand on the way up, pulling him up with me. “Come, my adorable Russian guardians. Let us be gone from this place.” I flipped my hair over my shoulder as I walked as aristocratically as I could toward the door. I stopped at the door, waiting for one of them to open the door for me, my nose obnoxiously high in the air. They both laughed. Misha grabbed the doorknob and opened the door, with a flamboyant bow.

I couldn’t help but laugh. I grabbed both of their arms as we walked toward the elevator. “You guys spoil me by playing along with my absurdity,” I said, as we stepped onto the elevator.

“We love it,” Misha said. “You make even the most horrific situations hilarious. I don’t know how you do it, but please never stop, gazelle.” I smiled widely at him..

As the doors of the elevator opened, both guys moved at the same time. “We’ll be around if you need anything, spider monkey,” Andrei said as he started to walk off the elevator.

I grabbed his arm, pulling him back for another hug. “Thank you. For always being so thoughtful and being so fucking awesome,” I said, squeezing him tightly. He picked me up, squeezing me, then set me back down.

I walked to Misha, wrapping my arms around his neck. “And thank you for annoying me as much as possible. I love it and I hope you never stop either,” I said. He laughed as he squeezed me tighter.

I walked quickly toward Adrik’s open office door. It felt like I couldn’t stop smiling, even if I wanted to. I was so anxious to see him that I had to stop myself from running to his office. Be cool, Séphie. I took a deep breath, as I walked into his office.

His eyes met mine almost immediately, like he had been waiting on me to walk in at that exact moment. He pushed his chair back from his desk, expecting me to climb into his lap. Instead, I stacked the few papers that were in front of him and moved them out of the way, sitting in their place. I pulled his chair back toward the desk, leaned down and kissed him. Thoughts of last night were still running through my head. I was struggling to keep control of myself as I held his face in my hands, my lips. on his. I felt his hands slide up my legs and that was all it took. I deepened the kiss. I used my feet to pull his chair as close to the desk as it would go. He grabbed my ass, pulling me toward him as he sat up straighter, matching my passion in his kiss.

I stopped the kiss, even though I didn’t want to. I looked at him, knowing he was also replaying the previous night in his head. I kissed him once more. “Hi,” I said, trying to catch my breath. 1 stared into his deep blue eyes. The fear that was there last night was completely gone, replaced by lust from my kiss.

“I’m very glad you’re awake now, solnishko,” he said, his wide smile spreading slowly across his face.

After they told me about the conversation with Trino, I had to admit to being shocked at myself. I had come up with the lighting Massimo on fire and throwing him off a cliff out of nowhere. At least, that’s what I thought at the time. I’d never been so spot on with someone I didn’t really know. This was new.

“We got a giant white board, too. It’ll be here later today,” Ivan added, grinning at me.

“You guys are kind of the best,” I said, thinking about how much I loved each of them in their own ways

Chapter One Hundred Eighty-Two

Sephie

We spent more time in Adrik's office that afternoon. They made plans for taking me to talk to Chen that evening. I wasn't sure he was still in the same apartment, but I knew he used to be there late afternoon to start dividing up his latest shipment to sell over the weekend. He had streamlined his process and he had very regular customers. He was always sold out by Sunday, and we generally wouldn't see him again until the following Friday. Every now and then, he would stick around for a day or two, but it was rare. You could just about set a clock to Chen's movements on the weekend.

Ivan and Viktor got into an argument over whether Ivan should stay at the building or go with us. Viktor said he should stay, Ivan said there was no way he wasn't going. They both had valid arguments, but neither was going to budge. Andrei was somewhat nervously watching the argument, as Viktor could also make him stay behind as he wasn't technically completely healed yet either, although he was much closer than Ivan.

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I caught Andrei's worried eye, winking at him. "Viktor?" I said as sweetly as I possibly could, to help diffuse their growing anger with each other. Both he and Ivan turned to look at me. "Why don't you let Ivan and Andrei drive. They can do that much, at least, right?"

Viktor thought for a moment, then relented. "Fine. They drive, but nothing more. I won't risk it."

I looked to Misha, who was also watching this entire exchange with an amused look on his face, for confirmation that it would be fine. He nodded his head. I walked to Viktor, reaching up and hugging his neck. I said quietly, so only he could hear me, "thank you, Papa Bear, for always worrying about me." He kissed the top of my head, holding me closer for a moment.

The plan was Stephen would leave first, with two other guys and set up across the street from my old apartment building. They could cover all the possible ways to the apartment building from above. It seemed a little overk ill for a conversation with my old neighbor, but after Massimo's attempt to grab me, I was happy to be over-prepared. Andrei and Ivan would drive. Misha and Viktor would stay with me at all times. There were also three other guys that normally stayed at the building, but that Viktor trusted, who were going with us, just in case. They reasoned it would be harder to separate us with three vehicles, rather than just two.

I did try to argue that someone should stay behind with Adrik, but I got sh ut down very quickly. Apparently, Team America was running backup for his security since Armando was also at the building. Adrik and Armando were planning to meet while we were gone anyway, so Team America would be with him.

Adrik pulled me close. I could see the worry in his eyes. "I'll find out everything I can. As quickly as I can, so I don't give you a heart attack," I said, smiling up at him. He was in his usual battle with the curls around my face.

"Stay with Viktor and Misha, please. If anything feels off, you leave right away," he said. I nodded my head. He leaned down and pressed his lips to mine. He surprised me by wrapping one arm tighter around my waist, the other hand ran through my hair to the back of my neck as he deepened the kiss. My knees went weak, but he had such a tight hold on me that I didn't move. Just as 1 felt myself starting to lose control, he stopped, kissing my forehead. He pressed his forehead to mine for a moment, as he caught his breath. "I love you, solnishko."

I looked up at him, kissing him once more. "I love you the most. Plus infinity. Plus one," I said, grinning at him. He laughed as he loosened his grip on me.

Ivan walked up with my jacket In hand. "Come on, princess. He'll never let you leave If we don't go now."

I took my jacket from him, laughing. As I turned to leave, Adrik pulled me back to him for one more kiss. I laughed against his lips. "I'll hurry back. I promise."

We pulled into the parking lot of my old apartment building. It looked so run down now that I hadn't seen it everyday for the last few months. It made me realize just how much my life had changed since I'd met Adrik.

Chen's car was in the parking lot. I pointed it out to Ivan and Misha. "That's Chen's car. He should be here." There was one other car in the parking lot, but someone was walking toward it as we pulled in.

I walked to Chen's apartment, followed closely by Viktor and Misha. I knocked three times, waited, then knocked twice more. Chen opened the door, completely surprised to see me standing there. Or maybe he was more surprised by Viktor and Misha standing behind me. Either way, he was surprised.

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"Sephie! What's the word, my girl?" he asked, raising his hand for me to grab it. When I did, he pulled me in for a hug, causing Viktor and Misha to take a step closer to me. I laughed to myself. They ha te it when I hug people they don't know. "Where you been, girl? I haven't seen you in forever. I stopped by the restaurant a few weeks ago. Max said you haven't worked there for a minute."

"Yeah, it's kind of a long story. How was Max? He looked well?" Lasked, suddenly curious about how he was doing.

"Yeah, he's good, but I think his girlfriend might be driving him in sane. She's a cook there. You know Max. He flirts with all the girls. That's how he makes his money, you know? If I had a face as pretty as his, I'd be working it all day long too," he said, smiling. His smile faded and he added, "she don't like that. Yo, she's got jealousy issues or some sh it. She came out the back like 20 times while I was there to check and make sure he wasn't flirting with anyone. He said he's going to go into debt soon. because his tips have basically fallen off. He was talking to me about dealing because he needs the money."

1 suddenly felt terrible. I hated it for Max. Misha noticed my mood shift and said, "serves him right," as he coughed, trying to cover up what he said. I glanced over my shoulder at him. He just shrugged his shoulders.

"Chen, I'm actually here to see if you've heard anything about your supply being replaced with brawn?"

His face fell. "Are you fu cking serious, Sephie? I don't fu cking touch that stuff. Why would I want to k ill my client base? That's a terrible business decision."

Chapter One Hundred Eighty-Three

Sephie

“Sooo…you haven’t heard anything, then?” I asked. I was relieved that he wouldn’t sell it, if he knew that’s what his supply was. The problem was that it was shaping up to look like they weren’t going to tell the dealers they were switching out the supply.

He thought for a moment. “I haven’t heard anything about it. I can talk to the other dealers I know and see if they’ve heard anything. Why are you asking? Are you dealing now? Is that why you have quite possibly the biggest security force I’ve ever seen behind you?”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Not dealing. But the biggest security force is with me all the time now. What boss do you deal for, Chen? I never asked you that.”

“None of them. This is kind of like no man’s land. I’m small time, anyway. This is just a side hustle to help fund my legit business I’m starting. I’ve been contracting for a few years now, trying to build a customer base for that. I have a couple guys working for me now. The dealing helps pay for that.”

“Chen, you never told me that. I knew you had a real job somewhere, but I didn’t know you had your own business. That’s awesome, man. I’m proud of you,” I said, giving him a high-five.

He smiled at me, like he’d never had anyone tell him they were proud of him before. His eyes lit up as he said, “wait, hold on. I have a business card. Wait here.” He ran back into the apartment and came back with a card. He handed it to me like it was a prized possession. “If you ever need anything, you call me. I got my contractor’s license and everything. It’s totally legit. My guys do great work too. If you need anything, I’ll hook you up. I still owe you for all the cheap food you used to hook me up with and for preventing me from making the biggest mistake of my life,” His face got dark for a second, as he remembered his ex-girlfriend.

“I’ll keep you in mind, for sure. Would you mind asking the other dealers you know? Do you know what bosses they work for, by chance?” I asked.

“Uh, one of them works for that Vito. One for Sal. And the third guy is loyal to some guy in Colombia. I still haven’t figured out how there’s a Colombian running things in the city, but whatever, I guess he is.”

I laughed. “You can leave the dealer that works for the Colombian out. He’s already been talked to by his boss. He’s a nice guy, for the record.”

Chen’s eyes went wide again. “How do you know that?”

“It’s probably best that you don’t know. There are some very bad people that are trying to replace the entire drug supply with brawn. That’s what’s important. We need to know what they’re planning so we can stop them. How often do you talk to the other dealers?”

“I’ll see them all on Sunday. I get my supply from them, so I pay them on Sunday when I’m sold out. I’ll ask them both If they know anything. How can I get in touch with you?” His question actually stumped me. I hadn’t had a cell phone for months. I never needed it. I had six of them at my disposal, so I just never bothered carrying mine. Since Max had started dating Tori, he’d fallen off the face of the earth and he was the only one I ever talked to outside the building.

Viktor handed Chen a card. “Call this number.” Chen looked skeptical as he took the card from Viktor.

“Don’t worry, they’re always with me. Just think of him like my very giant secretary if that makes it easier,” I said grinning at him.

“I promise I’ll call on Sunday. I want to know what’s going on. I’m not selling brawn, that sh it is fu cked up. I won’t touch it. And if someone is trying to fu ck with my side hustle, I want to know about it. I bet the other dealers will be pi ssed too. I don’t think I know any of them that will sell that sh it. It’s too risky. That’s bad business,” he said. He was clearly angry at the thought. of being given brawn instead of his normal supply.

“We’re trying to stop it, Chen, but it’s good to know that the other dealers that you know won’t be happy to know what they’re trying to pull. That gives us an advantage,” I said.

“Yeah, I’ll see what I can find out and I’ll call your giant secretary,” he said, looking over my shoulder as another car pulled into the parking lot.

“We’ll get out of here, so we don’t scare your customers. Thank you for your help, Chen. I’m glad you’re doing well still. And thank you for the card. I’ll pass along your info to anyone that needs it,” I said, raising my hand first for him to grab. He grabbed it, pulling me in once again for a hug.

“Sephie, you look great, as always. I’m glad you stopped by, my girl. Whatever you’re doing looks good on you,” he said, smiling.

We heard the car door open on the car that had pulled into the parking lot, so we made a quick exit. I’m sure Viktor and Misha weren’t exactly the type of marketing Chen was looking for with his clientele.

As we dr ove back to the penthouse, my mind was racing about what Chen had said about Max. Instead of thinking about him, I tried to distract myself by asking Misha and Ivan questions.

“Doesn’t it sound like they’re going to replace the supply without telling the dealers anything?” I asked from the backseat. They both nodded.

Misha said, “I didn’t know that the dealers were so against it. Either new dealers or there weren’t as many selling it before as we thought. Or that whole story is incorrect.”

“When does Andy come to the building? Maybe he knows more?” I asked.

“We were talking about getting him tonight, after we get back. Team America can go fetch him and bring him back,” Ivan said.

“You trust them to get him by themselves?” I asked, somewhat surprised.

He laughed. “No. No I do not. I meant Team America could go with Viktor, Misha, and Stephen again.”

I exhaled loudly. “Oh, thank God. That was totally going to mess up the wh ite board bet pool. We have the integrity of the data to consider now, boys.”

They were still both laughing as we pulled into the parking garage beneath the building.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 184

Chapter One Hundred Eighty-Four

Sephie

As we all walked to the elevator, Andrei slid his arm around my shoulders. He looked down at me, a smile across his face. “If I haven’t thanked you lately for both introducing me to Tori and also for being the catalyst that got her out of my life, thank you.”

I laughed. “Mostly for being the catalyst to get her out, though. Jesus. I had no idea she was that crazy.”

Misha looked at me, seriously. “You shouldn’t feel bad about Max though, gazelle. You warned him and he didn’t listen. Now he has to live with the consequences of that.”

I sighed, holding Andrei’s arm that was still around my shoulders, leaning against him as we rode the elevator up to Adrik’s office. “I know. I know. I can’t help but feel bad about it, even though I know he’s doing it to himself. It’s just so much worse than I thought it would be. Chen wasn’t joking when he said Max uses his face to get tips. He practically had a fan club he was so good at it. I mean, I saw him clear a couple grand in a weekend just in tips a few times. If she’s preventing that from happening, no wonder he’s thinking about dealing. He has a nice apartment to pay for.”

“Well, he could break up with her. Problem solved,” Ivan said, raising an eyebrow at me.

I looked at him, wide-eyed. “She might stab him. You didn’t see what she did to broccoli.”

Andrei squeezed my shoulders. He leaned his head down and rested it against mine. “We’re gonna add this to the wh ite board,” he said wistfully, making everyone laugh as we got off the elevator.

Armando and Team America were in Adrik’s office when we walked in. Andrei still had his arm around my shoulders and I was still holding on to his arm. I noticed the look from Mike as we walked in, but he said nothing. Adrik was standing, looking for a file on one of his bookshelves. He turned as we walked in, a clear look of relief on his face. I couldn’t help but smile as soon as I saw him. Andrei squeezed me once then lifted his giant arm off my shoulders so I could go to Adrik.

“How did it go?” he asked as he slid his arm around my waist, pulling me to him. He gave me a quick kiss, his blue eyes softening as he looked at me.

“Chen is still there, but he said he doesn’t know anything. He’s going to talk to two of the other dealers he knows. The third is one of Trino’s guys, so I told him not to bother. He’s mad though. He said he won’t touch brawn and he’s da mn sure not selling it if he knows about it. He also said he doesn’t know any other dealer that would sell it either. They have to be replacing the supply without the dealers knowing. It all seems really weird.” I glanced at Andrei and Ivan, across the office, then added quickly, “and Max is miserable and going broke most likely. The end.”

Adrik raised his eyebrow at the last revelation. He thought for a moment, then looked to Viktor. “When are you bringing Andy here?”

Ivan chuckled. “Princess already asked that on the way back.” He then said, in Russian, “fuc king adorable.” Adrik glanced down at me, his eyes laughing.

Viktor laughed, then said, “I think we can get him tonight. Mike and his guys can go fetch him. Misha, Stephen, and I will assist, but stay out of sight again, Just in case.”

Adrik nodded his head. “I think we need to find out everything he knows after Sephie approves him.” He looked to Misha, who nodded his head in agreement.

Viktor looked to Mike; they quickly made a plan to bring Andy back from the safe house. This time, Ivan and Andrel were quite happy to stay behind. I thought back to that first week at the house, when I thought I was torturing the guys by forcing them to stay with me. Adrik was right. They preferred it.

Once they left for Operation Fetch Andy, Ivan quietly asked me in Russian, “did you catch Mike’s look when you walked in with Andrei?”

I nodded my head. “I’m not entirely sure of what he thinks is happening, but it definitely makes me want to be even more affectionate with you guys just to see what kind of reaction I can get out of him. Maybe I was wrong about him,” I said, shrugging my shoulders.

Ivan gave me a coy smile. “You were thinking what I was thinking.”

“To the wh ite board, Super Squish!” I said, laughing.

Adrik and Armando were still discussing business while we all waited on Andy to arrive. Ivan and Andrei took the opportunity to start to teach me the Russian alphabet, which was admittedly harder than I thought it was going to be. I was in between them on one of the couches, both of them leaned toward me so they could write different letters on the notepad in my lap, when the extraction team came back. We might have planned it that way, just to see Mike’s reaction. It did not disappoint. He was clearly shocked when he walked into the office and saw the three of us so close together on the couch, but he masked it quickly.

Ivan said quietly, in Russian, “he’s definitely going to need to be checked more forcefully next time.”

Andrei said, “I didn’t notice it before, but I noticed it then for sure.”

As Andy walked into the office, I handed the notepad to Ivan, winking at him. I stood up and followed Adrik as he walked toward Andy. “Andy, it’s good to see you again,” he said, offering him his hand to shake.

Andy grabbed his hand, saying, “it’s good to see you too, sir. Thank you for getting me out.” He was clearly relieved to be here.

I realized that I recognized Andy. “I remember you,” I said. “You used to come with Salvadori to all the meetings.”

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He extended his hand to me, saying, “hello, Sephie. It’s good to see you again, too.” I shook his hand. He had a genuine look in eye. I had a flood of memories of him at the meetings once I saw his face. Andy never once said a word at the restaurant, but his face spoke volumes. In the beginning, when I was still learning to understand Italian well, I would watch his reactions when I couldn’t understand what they were saying.

Adrik noticed my silence. I felt his hand on my back as he said, “please, Andy, sit. We have much to discuss.” Once Andy walked past us, Adrik looked down at me, a concerned look in his eye. I whispered, “I think it’s okay. I’ll let you know.” He nodded once, walking us toward his desk. I hopped up on the bookshelves behind his desk as he sat down in his chair. Partly because I wanted to be able to fully concentrate on Andy, partly because I wanted to confuse Mike. I glanced at him to see his reaction to me not sitting with Adrik. Mission accomplished.

Chapter One Hundred Eighty-Five

Sephie

Adrik started, “tell me what you know about Sal’s plan.”

Andy sighed. “I don’t know everything. Sal has been suspecting me for months of working with you. Ever since that bracelet was a dud, he’s been accusing me of not being loyal. Well, he was right, but still. He would keep other guys with him more than me. I was rarely in the room when he would talk to Anthony or Lorenzo, but I still overheard parts of his heated conversations with them. Italians,” he said shrugging his shoulders. Adrik remained silent, allowing Andy to continue. “I happened on the warehouse where they’re making the brawn somewhat by accident. One of the other guys was supposed to make a delivery there, but he got called to go with Sal somewhere else. They needed that delivery at the warehouse to continue production that day, so he found me and asked me to do it instead. Sal didn’t know, I didn’t know what I was delivering, but as soon as I walked into the warehouse, I knew what was going on. Sal was one of the biggest producers of brawn a few years ago when it first came out. It takes a very specific setup to make. I remembered the setup and recognized it immediately. They’ve greatly increased the scale this time, though.”

As Andy talked, I could see he was somewhat nervous, but it wasn’t directed at Adrik. He was at ease with Adrik. There was another reason for his nervousness that I couldn’t place yet.

“I knew a couple of the guys guarding the warehouse, so I asked them a few questions. Told them that Sal had brought me in to oversee things, but he got called away before he could properly brief me on the operation. Most of those guys were unaware that Sal had been distancing himself from me lately, so they were happy to fill me in.” He stopped to rub his face with his hands. He leaned forward in his chair, his elbows resting on his knees. “They’ve revamped it. Made it even more dangerous.”

“They wanted to increase the aggressiveness with this formula. That’s what the guys that attacked Misha and Sephie said,” Ivan said.

Andy nodded. “That’s right. They’ve been quietly working on it for more than a year, from what I could tell. A few test runs here and there. A few people died. Those guys that were sent on Misha and Sephie, we never heard from again, so we didn’t know how successful that test was.”

“Sephie broke one guy’s face. That’s what happened to them,” Misha said, winking at me. All the guys couldn’t help but smile, like proud older brothers. I glanced at Mike, who was visibly surprised.

Andy looked at me, a look of surprise on his face as well. “Really?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “The thing about this edition of brawn is that it initially makes you aggressive, but it’s so lethal that your body is fighting to stay alive after a short period and that’s all you can focus on. It’s really only effective for a very short window and then the person either dies or passes out because they’re trying not to d ie. That makes you slower and gives chances for the victim to get away. Or break your face. You know, whichever. The old edition was actually much more effective. While it kept the aggression to a lower level, it was a sustained aggression over a much longer period. More damage that way.”

Adrik turned his chair toward me and opened his arm for me. He was still looking at Andy. I got up and climbed into his lap, facing Andy so I could keep watching him. There was still something he hadn’t told us yet that I was trying to figure out. Adrik wrapped his arms around my waist as I leaned back against him.

Andy laughed, shaking his head. “That would’ve been valuable information to them. From what I can tell, their plan is to replace the supply of all the other drugs with this formulation of brawn. They used to make it in pill form, but now they’re packaging it in powder form too, to pass it off as other drugs.”

“What happens when you inject it?” I asked. My fingers were starting to fidget with Adrik’s as this conversation was bringing up all the things I didn’t want to talk about normally.

“I’ve never seen it, but apparently it makes the person highly aggressive for a longer period of time before their body shuts down. It’s a quicker reaction time. Zero to rage in a minute or two. When they take the pills, it takes about half an hour for it to kick in. Those guys that attacked you had taken the pills,” Andy said. He almost looked apologetic, like it was somehow his fault for the attack on me and Misha.

“What about the plan to put it in the water in Armando’s area? How is that going to work?” Ivan asked.

Andy exhaled loudly. “Much of the product that’s at the warehouse is for Armando’s area, from what they told me. They’re planning on dosing that whole area with as high of a dose as possible to get the most chaos.”

I said quietly, “they’re planning on giving it to women and children then?”

Andy nodded his head. “One of the guys at the warehouse was against that part of the plan, but he said Sal almost killed him when he objected. He said if everyone died in Armando’s area of the city, all the better. Sal’s completely lost it. I’ve never seen him like this. He’s turned into Anthony. Anthony has always been off the rails, even as a kid. He was a mean little fu cker and it just got worse as he got older. But Sal has never been like that, until recently. I don’t know what changed, but it wasn’t good, whatever it was.”

We all sat in silence as we absorbed what Andy had just told us. I felt Adrik’s anger, without even needing to look at him. I kept fidgeting with his fingers, lightly, trying to keep him as calm as possible.

“What about the dealers? Do they know what’s going on?” Adrik asked.

“I’m not sure. I think they’ve talked to a few of them in certain areas, but not many. I think they’re planning on just replacing the supply, thinking no one will notice. The warehouse is at the docks, where the normal shipments come in. They’re planning on hijacking the normal shipment and replacing it with theirs. They have it packaged to look like the normal shipment so no one will be the wiser,” Andy said.

“What else is around the warehouse?” Adrik asked. He had moved one hand partially under my shirt, where no one could see, and his thumb was lightly rubbing back and forth on my bare skin, trying to keep himself calm.

“Not much that’s being used, from what I saw. It’s in a mostly abandoned section. The thing about manufacturing brawn is you need to be isolated. Part of the process produces a unique smell that’s unmistakable, but it’s also highly volatile until the process is complete,” Andy said.

Adrik looked to Ivan at the same time that Ivan looked to Adrik. I knew they had the same thought. I looked at Ivan, then turned to look at Adrik. “You boys are going to ask nicely, aren’t you?” I asked them both, in Russian. All the guys laughed while everyone else looked confused.

Andy still looked like he was holding something back. While the guys were somewhat distracted, I looked at Andy, “there’s still something you’re not telling us, isn’t there?”

Andy looked at me, then looked at the floor. The mood suddenly shifted in the room, as Ivan sat up straighter and so did Adrik.

“That day that you think Massimo’s guys tried to grab you? It wasret Massimo’s guys. They were Sal’s guys, made to look like they belonged to Massimo. I was part of that operation.

Chapter One Hundred Eighty-Six

Sephie

Adrik held me a little tighter as it was my anger that was threatening to come to the surface now. Ivan almost died that day and I still wasn’t over it. I looked at Andy, my anger oozing out, as I said, “you better start talking and if you lie to me, your face isn’t the only thing I’m gonna break today.” Adrik held onto me, but pushed his chair back slightly from his desk, putting the slightest bit of distance between me and Andy. Misha and Andrei also got up and moved in between me and Andy. Ivan stood behind Andy, Viktor and Stephen moved to the door.

Andy’s eyes went wide, as he knew he wasn’t going anywhere. He took a deep breath. “Sal is somewhat obsessed with getting you, Sephie. He found out that you know all of Massimo’s secrets.”

“HOW.” Adrik’s anger was now completely present in the room, which only served to feed mine, as well.

“Sal has been quietly talking to Dario, trying to get him away from Massimo for a while. The rumor about Sal and Dario hating each other isn’t true. It’s really Sal and Massimo that ha te each other. I don’t know how much you know about the relationship between Dario and Massimo, but it’s truly fu cked up. Massimo is a psy chopath of the highest order. He’s been controlling Dario since they were kids. Sal knows it, as he knew both of them when they were younger, which is why he and Massimo don’t get along. They all went to school together. I don’t know if you know, but Dario’s parents died when he was younger. He went to live with Massimo’s family after that happened. The story was that it was a car accident that killed them. It wasn’t. Massimo killed them. He was 12 at the time. Dario found out years later, but Massimo had already done so much damage to Dario that he couldn’t leave. He’d convinced Dario that his parents were evil and he saved Dario by killing them. So, when you met with Dario and Massimo and Sephie let it slip that she knew where the bodies were buried, Dario is the one that told Sal. Since then, Sal has been waiting for a chance to grab you. He needs your help to end Massimo,” Andy said.

“Keep talking,” I said, my anger still fully visible.

“That day that we tried to grab you, we saw a chance and we took it. We weren’t organized, really, which is why it was so easy for you to get away. But we also weren’t expecting you to be so lethal, Sephie. We didn’t account for your marksmanship,” he said. I glanced to Stephen, giving him a wink. He nodded his head discreetly. Andy continued, “I was watching the whole thing from a rooftop. When you dropped the guy at the vehicle, I knew the plan was a bust. I was supposed to ki ll Ivan that day, if you tried to escape, but I lied and said I could never get a clear shot. I had a clear shot, I just didn’t take it.” He looked at the floor again, clearly nervous at how we were going to react. He glanced up at me, a look of regret on his face. “I’m sorry.”

I sighed. “Thanks for not taking that shot, but you still almost killed Ivan and that’s going to take me a while to get over.” My anger was still clearly at the surface. I surprised everyone by getting up and walking out of the office. I walked to the other side of the floor, trying to calm down. I could feel my legs starting to shake and I didn’t want to be in there if it got worse. I was standing at the window, not really looking at anything, trying to get control of myself so the shaking wouldn’t get any worse. I felt Adrik’s arms slide around my waist as he pulled me close. He didn’t say anything, he just pulled me back against him, holding me tightly. I knew he felt my legs starting to shake when we were still in the office and he could feel the faint shaking in my body now. “I’m okay. I just needed a minute,” I said, turning my head to look up at him.

“I did too,” he said, as he pressed his lips to mine. We stood in silence for a few moments. “Aside from wanting to hurt Andy for the kidnapping attempt, what are your thoughts?”

“I could tell he was hiding something when he walked in. I think the kidnapping attempt was what he was hiding, but I need to be sure,” I said. “I just didn’t want to be in there if the shaking got worse, which is why I left.”

“Don’t worry about leaving. I had to stop all the guys from coming after you.” He turned us both so I could see his office door. “They’re all there, making sure you’re okay,” he said. I looked toward his office and sure enough, all five guys were lined up outside the office door watching me. I couldn’t help but smile. He turned me around to face him. That fear from the night before was back. “I have a solution, but it means people will d ie.”

“No, it means the monsters that are manufacturing the brawn will d ie. They know what they’re doing. I won’t feel sorry for them if they get blown up,” I said.

He smiled at me. “I didn’t even say it out loud and yet you still know just by looking at me and Ivan.”

“Well, I mean, this one was kind of obvious. Andy said it was volatile and then you two look at each other like it’s pyromaniac’s Christmas,” I said.

He laughed loudly. I glanced toward his office and saw all the guys visibly relax. “Are you going to tell any of the rest of them your plan? I’m still not completely sure about Andy. I need to make sure this is the only thing he’s holding back, but he’s pretty easy to read. And I’m still not totally sure about Mike either. That dude has women issues that he’s projecting onto me. It makes me want to fu ck with him, if I’m being honest.” I looked at Adrik, a wicked glint in my eye.

“You’re the go ddamn princess, solnishko. You can do whatever you please,” he said, his eyes mirroring the same wickedness he saw in mine.

Chapter One Hundred Eighty-Seven

Adrik

I felt a pull in my chest as my heart swelled listening to Sephie laugh in front of me. It was one of my favorite sounds, especially when it helped my anger subside. I was very happy that she had gotten up to leave the office after Andy's admission. It gave me a reason to do the same. I think the guys also needed a reason, as they all went after her as well. I noticed the looks "on Armando's guys' faces as we went after her. They don't understand the special relationship we all have with her and it was clear that at least Mike was struggling with it. Of course Sephie already knew and I fully supported whatever she wanted to do to make him even more uncomfortable about it.

When it came to my guys, I never had a moment of jealousy or doubt regarding them and Sephie. I trusted her and I trusted them. I knew she looked at me differently than she looked at them. It was clear that she had a role in each of their lives. She was helping each of them to fully realize their potential, just as she was helping me to realize mine. I wasn't going to stand in the way of that. My guys were my family. We'd been through hell together. I was closer with them than I was with anyone. It made me happy to see them with her and to know that she was safe when I wasn't around, because they would be there. I could see how someone on the outside of our little family might struggle to understand the dynamic, but that was their problem, as far as I was concerned.

"We should probably go back. At least so the guys don't get anxious and murder Andy to make me happy," Sephie said, her fingers lightly running over my facial hair. She still had a wide smile on her face.

I sighed. I really could use a minute or two longer away from them. "Not yet, but I'll make sure they don't murder him just yet," I said. I wrapped my arms around her waist, pulling her off the floor and walking to the elevators. I set her down and looked at the guys. I jerked my head toward us to indicate they should come to us. They all quickly walked to us. I knew they were waiting by the office door to make sure no one decided to leave. This way, we could still ensure no one would leave, but we could have a moment to ourselves. I valued their opinions, always. Especially if it involved Sephie. I knew they had her best interests in mind always, just like I did.

Once they were all standing next to us, I said to them in Russian, "Sephie was worried you were going to murder Andy just to make her happy before we went back into the office."

"Say the word, Sephie," Stephen said, his voice dripping with anger. It took me by surprise, as he was usually the quiet one of the group, but I could clearly see his anger. She stepped away from me to give him a hug.

"Aww, Stephen. You're all soft and nougaty now too," she said as he held onto her tightly. I knew he was using her to calm down. I'd honestly only ever seen him that angry a handful of times and it never ended well for the other person. Stephen was a dark horse. He was the shortest out of all of us. He was still tall comparatively, but at 6'2, he was visibly shorter than the rest of us. Compared to the other guys, Stephen looked like the weakest link, but he was anything but. He could be a monster, just like the rest of us. I'd seen him get pushed past his limit before. It wasn't pretty. He admittedly took the longest to warm up to Sephie, but those two had gotten closer lately. I think she recognized that he was the loner type and let him come around when he was ready. Clearly, he was just as attached to her now as the rest of us.

She stepped back from him, smiling sweetly at him. It made his cheeks flush slightly. She moved back to my side, as I pulled her to me. "Now," she said, still speaking Russian in case we were overheard, "I still don't fully trust Andy. He was definitely holding back when he first got here, but I don't know if it was only the kidnapping attempt or If there is something more. He's genuine in everything he says. His face is an open book. I just want to make sure he's not holding anything else back from us, because that's the biggest feeling I get from him. He's telling us the truth when he speaks, but I don't think he's giving us everything." She paused, but then added, "and I'm still not completely sure about Mike either. I thought checking him last night would solve it, but he still seems to have a problem with me, especially when he sees me with you guys versus my boyfriend who happens to be the Lord King Boss of the underworld. There's a lot to unpack there, if I'm being honest."

I chuckled at her description of me. Stephen spoke up again, "I have some insight into that, but we can talk about it later. I think the more important situation is what Andy just told us and what to do about the warehouse."

"Noted, but follow-up question: is it worthy of an appearance on the white board? Because we're gonna need to know about that right now if it is," Sephie said, grinning at him.

We all laughed. Stephen shook his head no. "Not white board worthy. It really can wait," he said.

"Priorities, people," Sephie said like she was conducting a business meeting. It made us all laugh even more.

Ivan said, "I think, as Sephie put it, asking them nicely to stop distributing is the way to go."

I nodded. "I agree. But I don't necessarily want to let the others in on that plan just yet. Mike isn't making me happy right now. I don't know how much I trust that guy."

Viktor looked apologetic. "He wasn't like that when I interviewed him."

"Papa Bear, it's not your fault. He has some weird women issues that he's projecting onto me. It wouldn't have come up in an interview. I'm not even sure it would've come up if he just had to deal with Giana. It seems directed at me. Maybe he hates redheads, I don't know," Sephie said as she went to Viktor, wrapping her arms around his waist. She rested her head against his chest as he kissed the top of her head, his giant arms engulfing her.

"How does anyone hate redheads? You're all feisty and shit," Misha said, grinning at her.

"It's a real thing, my adorable Russian guardian. It's a clear love/hate situation. Men either love us or hate us. There's very rarely an in between. I just figure the ones that hate me are descended from the men who burned my kind hundreds of years. ago, so I don't want to be around them any damn way," she said, walking back to me.

Armando came out of the office, looking somewhat concerned. He walked up to us, "everything ok, Boss?"

I nodded my head. "We were just coming back in. We just needed to discuss a matter privately first." I knew Armando wouldn't question me. I felt a slight pang of guilt for taking advantage of that. I would tell him the plan, if my mind was changed about Mike, but not before.

Chapter One Hundred Eighty-Eight

Adrik

“Is Andy trustworthy?” Armando asked Sephie.

“I haven’t completely decided yet. I want to say yes, but I need to make sure before I make up my mind definitively,” she said, her sweet smile on her face as she talked to Armando. She really did like him, but she also knew not to say too much. It was a tricky situation.

Armando ran his hand through his hair. “What a mess. We still need to ask about my water district guy and what he knows about that. I’m really concerned about that. I can’t have the people in my area exposed to that much brawn.”

“I would like to know if he knows anything about Anthony’s ex-girlfriend, as well,” Sephie said.

“Come, let’s go find out,” I said, as I pulled her toward the office.

When we walked back in, Andy was clearly worried. I remained silent, as did Sephie, as I sat in my chair. She hopped onto the bookshelf behind my desk once more. I looked to Armando, giving him the lead for questions about his water district.

“Andy, what do you know about the guy in my water district that they approached?” Armando asked. He was clearly stressed about this situation. He looked like he hadn’t been sleeping very well. I caught myself wondering if Giana was as good at comforting him as Sephie was at comforting me.

“That guy’s name is Brian, I think?” Andy asked. Armando nodded. “Brian’s sister used to date Anthony.” Andy looked at me.

“That bracelet Sal gave you the day you banished Anthony?” I nodded. “That bracelet was made for Brian’s sister. Jennifer is her name. Anthony was sure she was cheating on him, so he gave her that bracelet so he could listen in on her conversations. She was pregnant at the time, too. Turns out she was cheating, but she swore the baby was Anthony’s. She could never get him to submit to a DNA test to prove it, but she always remained constant that it belonged to him. When Sal was looking for ways in, he remembered that Brian was Jennifer’s brother and that he worked at the water district in Armando’s area of the city. He went to Jennifer and agreed to have his DNA tested against her kid. If the kid was Anthony’s, it would share DNA with Sal. Once it was proven that the kid belonged to Anthony, Sal went to Brian and agreed to take care of the medical expenses for the kid and to support Jennifer as well, but Brian had to give his people access to the water supply. He didn’t tell him why, but he said the deal was completely dependent on that. Brian was in a tough spot. He’d been supporting his sister and now with the kid being diagnosed with ca ncer, he was struggling to keep up with medical hills. He agreed,” Andy said.

“How much do you know about the relationship between Anthony and Jennifer when they were dating?” Sephie asked. I could still hear an edge to her voice, as could the guys, but she was trying to control it. Ivan looked at her, still concerned. I assumed she smiled at him, as I saw his expression soften slightly and he winked at her.

“Anthony is much like Massimo. I would more readily believe that Massimo was Anthony’s father than Sal, to be honest. Anthony is a psycho. Like It didn’t surprise any of us one bit what he did to you at the restaurant, Sephie. That was just the first time he’d gotten caught and suffered the consequences of it. Jennifer would show up with fresh bruises regularly. She would have choke marks on her, too. One of Sal’s underbosses was concerned for her. He thought maybe her father was beating her. It never occurred to him that it could be Anthony. He’s the one that started a relationship with her while she was still with Anthony,” Andy said. I could see the fear flash across his face again.

“Did Anthony ki ll him or did Sal?” I asked.

“Sal did. Once they found out she was seeing him, Sal called him into his office and shot him point blank. Anthony had convinced Sal that he was trying to steal his woman and child from him. But after the underboss was dead, Anthony abandoned Jennifer and his kid. Completely cut her off. She had nothing.”

“S ick fu cks,” Sephie mumbled under her breath behind me. I was the only one that heard her.

“I couldn’t agree more,” I said quietly, in Russian, so that only she could understand me.

“What do you know about Anthony’s plans once he gets back to the city?” Ivan asked. “What’s the end goal here?”

“I’m not entirely sure, but I know he can’t stand Ghost since that night at the restaurant when he got his as s handed to him multiple times in one night. Anthony is a petulant child in a grown man’s body. He doesn’t take reprimands well. Even worse that they were public. I’ve seen the look on his face that he had when Ghost yelled at him for slapping Sephie in front of everyone. He won’t stop until he destroys her to get to Ghost,” Andy said.

“What’s Sal’s relationship like with Anthony? I got the impression he’s scared of his own son,” Viktor asked.

Andy nodded. “He’s definitely scared of him. He always has been. Even when Anthony was young. He learned as a small child that he could throw a fit and he’d get anything he wanted. It’s only gotten worse as he’s gotten older. I’ve seen him choke Sal before. Sal basically does whatever he wants. Even Anthony going to Sicily was Anthony’s idea. He just didn’t expect you to banish him there. He was expecting to go there, take care of business with Lorenzo, and then be able to come back. In his mind, he’s untouchable.”

That was good. When you get cocky, you get sloppy. He’d be an easier target that way.

“What do you know about their talks with the Colombians?” Ivan asked.

“I don’t know much about it, but if the Colombians don’t play ball with Anthony and Lorenzo, they’ve been making their own plans to completely bypass the Colombian supply. They’ve been talking to the Mexican cartels in secret,” Andy said.

Sephie laughed behind me, causing everyone to look at her. I knew where she was going before she said anything. “Do those du mb fu cks not know the Colombians are the ones that supply the Mexican cartels with product? They can try and bypass the Colombians all they want. They’ll just cut off the supply completely. No nothing. You can’t even make brawn that way. Jesus these people are stu pid.”

I felt the smile creeping across my face as I watched the rest of the room, outside of our group, realize what she had just said. Clearly, no one else had thought about that except the Russians in the room and Sephie. I couldn’t help but feel proud that she was mine.

“How do you know that, Sephie? I didn’t even know that,” Armando asked, clearly surprised.

“I thought everyone knew that it takes the specific climate of Colombia to grow the plants. You can grow it further south, as well, but the yields aren’t as high and the quality isn’t as good. Colombia is the prime location for growing the plant that makes the drugs,” she said, somewhat flippantly.

Ivan grinned at her, saying in Russian, “they were today years old when they learned that you could run the organization better than they can.”

She laughed, hopping down from the bookshelves and going to him. She sat down in between him and Misha, so she’d be on Ivan’s good side. He put his arm around her shoulders, letting her curl up beside him. He kissed the top of her head. I glanced in Mike’s direction, who had a strange expression on his face. I couldn’t tell if he was shocked or angry or both. I glanced back toward Sephie and caught Misha’s eye, who had also seen Mike’s expression change. Without a word, he reached over and grabbed one of Sephie’s legs and stretched it across his lap, keeping his hand protectively on her leg. “This is definitely going on the wh ite board,” she said in Russian. “This might replace the creative ways to d ie as my favorite wh ite board addition, even.

Of course, we all laughed, forgetting for a moment about the severity of the situation.

Chapter One Hundred Eighty-Nine

Adrik

We continued to talk with Andy, but it was starting to get late. Armando wanted to leave to go check on Giana, who had been alone most of the day, as she still felt intimidated by being in the same room with so many men. We set Andy up in a spare apartment, close to Armando's guys. Viktor gave strict orders to all the security that Andy was not to leave the building unless he was with one of us, under any circumstances. They had orders to sh oot him if he tried.

I was somewhat relieved for it to be just us once again, so we could relax somewhat. Sephie got up from between Ivan and Misha, declaring, "I need a change of scenery. Everyone come upstairs. We're ordering food." She had a grin on her face. I think she enjoyed giving us orders once in a while.

Stephen pulled his phone out of his pocket. "Chinese or Thai?"

We all looked at each other, then looked at Stephen as we all said "Thai" at once.

"Done and done," he said as he walked out of the room to make the order.

Once upstairs, we continued the conversation about what to do. "I'm going to call Trino in the morning, but I want to keep Armando in the dark for now. I don't think Trino knows Anthony has been talking to the Mexicans. They have a very strained relationship, at best. I don't like dealing with them at all. This could start a war between the Colombians and the Mexicans if we're not careful," I said.

"I think Trine is on your side completely. I think Armando is too, but I don't trust Mike at the moment, until we figure out what his issue is," Sephie said. She thought for a moment. "What does asking nicely entail, exactly?"

Andrei chuckled. "We need more details about the building, so we know where to place the charges. And if we can gain access

inside or if we have to do it from the outside."

"What's the difference?" she asked.

"Inside is a cleaner demolition. Outside makes a bigger boom, basically," Andrei said.

"Bubba, I had no idea you enjoyed blowing things up this much," she said, grinning at him.

"Who do you think blew the ho le in the wall of the Syrian prison to ask nicely if Viktor could come out and play?" he said, laughing.

"I did not bet on you, I'll be honest. You don't strike me as that turbulent," she said.

He laughed. "I'm not. But I really enjoyed chemistry class."

"Ne rd alert!" she said, laughing, causing everyone to join her in yet more laughter.

Right on time.

"So how do you guys get the details of the warehouse that you need to make it go boom?" she asked, clearly curious about this plan.

Viktor exhaled loudly. "That might be the most complicated part. I'm sure they're going to have the place surrounded and watched constantly. If It's at the docks, that could work to our advantage or disadvantage, depending on the exact location. If

it's on the water, that could work in our favor."

Sephie thought for a moment. "Andy said the area was mostly abandoned. What if we make it not abandoned, so there's a reason for people to be down there?"

We all thought for a moment, nodding in agreement. "That could work. We'd need a lot of people to make it work well, though,"

Viktor said.

"How many dealers are in the city? If Chen was right and most of the dealers aren't down with selling brawn, I would bet good money they would help. There's a hierarchy of dealers, apparently, too. Like, I don't even think the bosses know all the dealers in the city. The dealers have dealers who have their own dealers," Sephie said.

We were quiet for a moment, all thinking about her idea. It was a good one. Set up a fake warehouse for a few weeks to give people a reason to be there while they collected information on the building.

Ivan said, "that's not a bad idea. If we can set up a fake warehouse next to the one they're using, it would give us a reason for electricians and the like to be close to their warehouse and maybe even in their warehouse."

Sephie's face lit up. "Chen is a contractor too. He can help us get real…whatever we need to make it look as legit as possible. I'm sure he knows electricians too." She pulled a business card from her pocket and handed it to Viktor. "I know Chen will help us, for sure. He's the most laid-back dude I've ever met, so for him to be angry about something means he feels very strongly about it. He was not happy about the possibility of being forced to unknowingly sell brawn. If he's right about the other dealers, they'll help us out as well."

"We'll start checking it out tomorrow and see what we can come up with," Ivan said.

Stephen's phone rang. He took it out of his pocket, looked at the screen, then put it back. "Food's here. I'll be right back," he said, walking toward the door.

"When you get back, I want to hear your insight into the Mike problem," Sephie said.

"Deal," he said, walking out of the penthouse. Sephie caught me smiling to myself, happy that those two seemed to be getting as close as she was with the other four guys. It took me a while to warm up to Stephen as well, but he was an integral part of the team at this point.

While we were all eating, Stephen enlightened us with his insight on Mike. "I

Was in the gym at the same time as Keith the other night. We were just shooting the sh it. I asked a lot of questions, curious about where they all came from. Keith used to work with Mike, you know." He looked at Viktor, who nodded his head.

"They told me when I was interviewing them that they knew each other," Viktor said.

"Right, well they worked together in a really small town. They were both on the police force. It was the town they grew up in, too. Mike climbed the ranks quickly after joining the force. He was a very big fish in a very small pond, basically." He paused to take a bite of food. I glanced at Sephie. I could tell she was beginning to put pieces together. Stephen continued, "Keith says he's always been that stereotypical alpha male type, but not in a good way. He takes the aggression to an extreme, things like

that."

"Do you know what made him leave that small town?" Sephle asked.

"Keitia said he made it as far as he could make it without someone above him dying. He got tired of waiting. He's big on titles. He likes authority, Keith said. My best guess, and you might tell me I'm completely wrong, Seph, but I think he almost feels threatened by you. He operates by the rules of the animal kingdom, if you will. He sees all of us and we're clearly a formidable opponent, so he respects that automatically. But then he sees Seph and at least in his mind, she's clearly inferior, but then he

sees us deferring to her, protecting her, and well, following her around like puppies, because let's be real, we do that. But I mean, it's by choice. We all want to be near her. But for someone like Mike, who isn't necessarily smart enough to see past the black and wh ite of big male equals strength, small woman equals weak rules, it's likely disturbing." We all chuckled when he called us puppies. Guilty. But I didn't see any of us changing that anytime soon.

"Has the man ever been laid?" Sephie asked.

Stephen laughed. "I don't know the answer to that question. That's not really information I was interested in." Stephen looked at all of us, somewhat nervously, adding, "Mike really isn't my type."

I caught Sephie's eye, knowing she knew what that meant, but waited to see if any of the other guys picked up on it. They laughed, thinking he was joking. Sephie looked thoughtfully at Stephen, trying to figure out if he really wanted to have this conversation or not right now. He looked at her, realizing that she picked up on his hint. They had a silent conversation, then Sephie asked, "but Keith is your type, isn't he?" Stephen blushed, slightly, but a small smile crept across his face. Sephie said, "he's way hotter. Good choice."

The other four suddenly realized what he had meant. Andrei looked at him, smiling. "This makes so much more sense. I thought you were a monk, dude. You've never once been interested in a girl. I was beginning to worry there was something wrong. I'm so relieved."

Misha's broad smile stretched across his face. "Me too, bro. And I agree with Sephie. Keith is definitely the better choice. Now I understand why he's been staring at the back of your head so much."

Stephen looked surprised. "He has?"

"Yeah, dude. We've all noticed it. We thought he was just awkward after you saved his a ss when you guys went to get Andy. You know, some dules have a problem saying thank you. I put him squarely in that category. Turns out I was wrong." Ivan said, laughing.

Stephen suddenly looked like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. "You guys don't care?"

Viktor looked at him, seriously. "The only thing I care about is that you kept it from us for so long. You could've told us before now. It wouldn't have changed anything. But I have to say I'm impressed you hid it so well. We had no clue."

I cleared my throat. They all looked at me. "Well, it should come as no surprise to anyone, but Sephie knew. She just wanted. Stephen to feel.comfortable enough to tell you guys himself."

They all said, "of course" at the same time. Stephen, curious, asked, "when did you figure it out, Seph?"

"Not that long ago, honestly. When we were at the club with Trino. I saw you talking to one of his guys while we were making bets at the bar. He was also very attractive. You like them pretty," she said, grinning at him. Stephen stood up and went to her, pulling her into a hug. "Thank you. For letting me tell everyone in my own time. And thank you for showing me how much more awesome it is to just be yourself all the time," he said. She hugged him tightly.

He walked back to his seat, visibly lighter, I smiled to myself thinking about how Sephie had brought out the best in all of us. I remembered Ms. Jackson's words from so many months ago. She'll show you the best parts of yourself, if you let her. I hoped she'd never stop.

Stephen said, as he cleared his throat, "back to Mike. You add in that she's affectionate with all of us, while usually in the same. roon as her boyfriend and Mike just assumes that something else is going on with Seph and all of us, which proves to further his original assessment that she's the weaker of us and using s ex to gain favor."

Ivan looked to Stephen, "so how do we check Mike more forcefully, so he learns his place?"

Stephen thought for a moment. "I only have one idea so far, but I'm not sure you're going to like it."

"Let's hear it," Sephie said.

"I think you're going to have to kick his a ss," Stephen said.

Chapter One Hundred Ninety

Adrik

I watched Sephie's reaction at Stephen's solution to the Mike problem. She thought for a minute, clearly unsure about it.

"I don't know how I feel about this," I said. "It's one thing for you guys to spar with her. I know you guys won't hurt her. I don't know that I can say the same for Mike. If he hurts her, he's a dead man."

She leaned into me, smiling sweetly at me. She had that spark in her eyes that only I could see. I felt my heart jump in my chest as I looked at her.

"Mike doesn't have the same training as Sephie does now," Viktor said. "This could actually work out really well. I was going to have them start training with us starting Monday anyway."

"Sephie can be his first test. I heard him trying to convince you that he didn't need any training. Tell him if he can best her, then he can skip it," Ivan said, a sly smile stretched across his face.

"But what if he really can best me?" Sephie asked.

Misha and Andrei looked at each other, laughing loudly. "Gazelle, you don't need to worry about him besting you. We need to worry about being able to pull you off him, so you don't seriously injure him."

"But he's not you and Bubba. He's not going to know what to say to pi ss me off. I don't know how to just summon the anger," she said. She still had a worried look on her face.

"That's what we're for," Andrei said. "We'll get you to see red and throw you in there with him."

Stephen had been quietly contemplating this plan, as he was want to do. He looked at Sephie, "from the impression I got from talking to Keith, Mike is more talk than anything. He likely did well on the force in the small town, but it's not saying much when you're King Turd on a pile of shi t."

"Okay, one, it's going to be extremely difficult for me to not call him that to his face from now on, so thank you for that. And two, he's still a dude and bigger and stronger than I am. Biology can't be ignored," she said.

"He's bigger and stronger, but you're lighter and faster. That's always your advantage, spider monkey. That's how you keep all of us on our toes. We have brute force, sure. But it's harder to move that much mass as quickly as you can move your lighter, smaller body. And when you're angry?" He scoffed, "you're like lightning fast. That's why me and Misha enjoy pi ssing you off so much. You're a serious challenge when you're angry," Andrei said.

"If you fight him like you did Misha on the beach, Mike won't know what hit him. That's the best I've seen you look, princess," Ivan said. "If Keith is right and Mike never really took his training seriously, it's going to be painfully obvious very quickly. And something tells me that you don't need to worry about being able to summon your anger with him. I don't even think you'll need Andrei and Misha as backup to make you angry. I'm fairly certain Mike is going to inevitably say something to pi ss you off,

even more than we're able to."

Stephen said, "I feel like this definitely needs to make it to the wh ite board. Both for how long it takes her to take him down and for how long it takes him to say something that will unleash the fire we all know is in there."

They all ended up looking at me, as they knew it wouldn't happen if I didn't want it to. I looked to Sephie. "This only happens If you're okay with it and want to do it. I have zero doubts that you'll be able to handle him. He does strike me as more bark than bite, but we don't know that for sure either."

She looked at me for a moment. I could still see the uncertainty in her eyes. She then looked at each of the guys. "You'll all be there?" Everyone nodded. She looked down, her hands fidgeting in her lap. She took a deep breath, then said, "I'll do it."

The guys all erupted in elated yells. I couldn't help but laugh. I knew Sephie would be able to handle herself. My guys were trained by the best and they trained her. I'd seen what she could do and I knew she was still holding back. This might even be good for her.

I was worried, however, about controlling my own temper in the event she got hurt. It would take all five of the guys to pull me off Mike and Ivan still only had the use of one arm. The odds were in my favor and I knew it. That didn't bode well for Mike, if it came down to that.

Sephie couldn't help but smile at the guys' reactions to her agreeing to this. The more I thought about it, the more I thought it could be good for her. She was holding back, but only because she didn't believe in her abilities 100%. Facing someone she knew nothing about could be a major confidence boost for her.

I called Trino the next afternoon. I waited until after noon, to give him time to recover from his night of partying that ! assumed happened. When he answered his phone, he sounded like he had just woken up.

"Jefe, que pasa, amigo?" he said, the sleep still evident in his voice.

"Trino, I have more information that you're going to want to hear," I said. I filled him in on what we'd found out about Dario. and Massimo, as well as what Salvadori, Anthony, and Lorenzo had been planning. When I got to the part about them negotiating with the Mexican cartels, Trino's anger erupted over the phone.

"THEY DID WHAT??" he yelled into the phone. I could hear him move the phone away from his face, cursing loudly. He gained control, but he was still cursing in Spanish as he said, "do those pendejos not know that I supply the Mexican cartels? I do. ME. There's no bypassing me."

I had to laugh. "Sephie is actually the one that informed everyone else of that fact. Mando didn't even know that, nor did his guys, or Sal's guy that's giving us this information."

"If you don't marry her, I'm going to steal her, Jefe. I respect you, but I'm telling you right now, I will risk it all to get her. She can learn to love Colombian men," he said, laughing.

"I might actually like to see you try, if I'm being honest," I said.

"That hurts, Jefe. I'm a sensitive man," he said, still laughing.

"We're working on getting more information on the warehouse where they're manufacturing the brawn. We'd like to have New Year's fireworks early. How much longer do you think you can keep Anthony and Lorenzo down there?" I asked.

He exhaled. "I can keep them as long as I possibly can if it's helping you out. I'm enjoying toying with them. It might be concerning how much I'm enjoying toying with them. They still don't know that Dario and Massimo are down here. I've kept them separate from each other. I can let that slip and watch them fight each other for at least two weeks. It'll give Massimo hope that I'm going to let him live. Makes it that much sweeter when I throw him off that cliff."

I laughed. "Have you picked out which cliff? I vote for the highest one you can find. Draw it out as long as possible. He's truly a slek fu ck, Trino. He killed Dario's parents when he was just 12 years old. Then he convinced Dario that he did him a favor by killing them."

There was silence for a moment on the other end. "That's evil, Jefe. That's true evil. I mean, you and I are 'no saints, but we've got rules."

"If you were wavering at all about ending him, there's your motivation to stick with your original plan. You're doing the world a favor," I said.

I could hear him cursing in Spanish. "What about the warehouse? Do you need help with that? My dealers weren't too happy to find out they were trying to replace their supply without telling them. None of them want to sell brawn. That's going to ki ll at least half their customer base. That's a terrible business decision."

"That's what we're finding on our end, too. When brawn originally surfaced, the story was that the bosses were the ones that forbade the dealers from making it and selling it, but I'm not sure I believe that story anymore. Something else went on. Or the city has entirely new dealers, which isn't likely." While this wasn't a priority, I was curious to find out what really happened when brawn had originally appeared in the city. Somehow the story wasn't adding up now.

"I can have my dealers get in touch with your guys. A few of them already offered to help. The rest of them will help if I tell them to. La zy cabrons…" he said, trailing off.

"That would be great, Trino. We're gathering information right now to find out the best course of action. The warehouse is in an abandoned area, so we're going to try to set up a fake warehouse next to it to gather intel. Gives us a reason to be there without arousing suspicion," I said.

"Good plan. But as every good Colombian knows, a car bomb will work in a pinch," he said.

I chuckled. "I'll keep that in mind, Trino."

"I'll keep you posted on the mo rons down here. If you hear anything more about the Mexican cartels, I would appreciate a heads up. Our relationship is strained, at best."

"Will do, Trino. I'm trying to avoid a war between you and them. I'll keep you informed. And on the off chance you talk to Armando, he doesn't know of our plan for the warehouse yet. We're still unsure of one of his security guys, so I haven't brought him in on the plan yet."

"You have my word, Jefe."

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Chapter 191

Chapter One Hundred Ninety-One

Adrik

The weekend seemed to fly by. We spent most of Saturday finding information about the area of the docks where the warehouse was located. Andy had given us the exact location, so we were looking at the surrounding buildings to see what our options. were. It takes time to track down who owns what building and what that building was used for when it was occupied. If we were going to move into one of the buildings, it needed to be for a believable excuse.

The guys spent most of Sunday morning trying to calm Sephie's nerves about the following morning's plan for Mike. She was still okay with the plan, but she was still worried about it. Giana had asked Sephie if she wanted to go to lunch with Ms. Jackson on Sunday over a week ago. I sent Viktor, Misha, and Stephen with her. Armando sent Mike and Keith with Giana.

When Sephie got back, she was ready for the following morning. "Yep, I feel good about kicking his a ss now," she said as she walked back into the penthouse with Viktor, Misha, and Stephen. They were all laughing.

Ivan and Andrei had been with me, still trying to find more information on the buildings at the docks. We all looked expectantly at Sephie as she walked in and sat down next to me on the couch. Her cheeks were slightly flushed. I couldn't tell if it was because it was colder outside or if she was angry.

"Did something happen, solnishko?" I asked as she sat next to me on the couch. She exhaled loudly. I could see her frustration clearly on her face.

"You know it's bad when Ms. Jackson says he's not allowed at Bingo," Misha said, laughing.

Viktor, still laughing, said, "he's going to need that extra training. He might've embellished on his experience level."

Sephie looked at Stephen. "King Turd," she said, laughing. Stephen just nodded, laughing with her.

"I thought they did an okay job getting Andy?" I asked, somewhat confused.

"They did. Apparently when you add women, Mike turns into an as shole. Sephie had to check him again when he got a little too harsh with Giana," Viktor said.

"Tomorrow is going to be a very hard day for him," Sephie said, leaning into me. She held onto my arm as I stretched it across her lap, leaning her head onto my shoulder.

"Bad day for him, but a good day for the rest of us," Misha said, grinning at her.

"What happened?" Ivan asked, curious.

"Giana is used to you guys, at this point. You know what you're doing and you kind of guide those of us that are mostly clueless along without saying anything and usually without us even realizing you're doing it. You're all very good at your Jobs, which means you can quietly do your jobs. Mike is not that way. He yelled at Giana for going the wrong way, so I yelled at him. It was completely unnecessary and now she's scared of him even more than she's scared of you guys," Sephie said.

Ivan cursed under his breath. "Tomorrow is Indeed going to be rough for him."

Sephie was awake bright and early on Monday morning. She woke up before the sun even really started to rise. I felt her stir, moving off my chest. She stretched next to me, her joints popping like normal. I rolled over, wrapping my arms around her and burying my face in her neck.

"You're up early, my love," I said.

She turned toward me, draping her leg over mine, her hand running lightly over my back. "Yeah, I can't sleep anymore. My brain won't stop."

"You're still worried about Mike?" I asked. I moved so that I could look at her.

"Yes, but not just him. I just keep thinking about everything happening, really. I'm even worried for Trino now that we know just how si ck Massimo really is." Her fingers started to lightly play with my facial hair.

I laughed. "If you don't mind, I'm going to skip telling him that. He told me he was going to steal you yesterday. I don't want to give him any more hope that you can learn to love Colombian men." She looked at me wide-eyed, her fingers frozen in place. "I told him I'd like to see him try," I said, grinning at her.

"He was kidding though, right? Please tell me he was kidding," she said. I could feel the faint shaking in her leg start as she thought about the possibility of having to worry about Trino coming for her as well.

"He was kidding, Sephie. He would never. He was laughing when he said it. He's made it clear that he's fascinated by you, but he has too much respect for me to try anything. And besides, you've seen Trino. You could snap him in two without breaking a sweat. He's the last person you need to be worried about." I wrapped my arms around her tighter, pulling her closer to me, trying to keep the shaking from getting worse. I felt her sigh and her body relax as I held her. I kissed her forehead. "Come, I'll make you breakfast. You need fuel for Mike's big day."

I grabbed my phone as we got out of bed. I had a feeling that the guys were all awake too. They were like children on Christmas morning about this training session with Mike. I sent Viktor a text telling him to come up for breakfast.

"Who are you texting so fre aking early?" she asked as she was putting her hair up into a bun on top of her head.

I grinned at her. "I told the guys to come up for breakfast too. I'm sure they're all awake by now. They can't wait for Mike's big, day, either."

"I mean, no pressure," she said, rolling her eyes. A small smile crept across her face, though.

We barely had time to get dressed and the guys were walking into the penthouse. We had just walked into the kitchen when they all walked in. Yep, they were excited about this.

Ivan walked to Sephie, sliding his good arm around her shoulders. "Good morning, princess," he said, squeezing her shoulders. He kissed the top of her head as she leaned into him.

"I think you're all more excited about this than I am," she said, smiling at each of them.

"Maybe a little," Misha said, grinning back at her.

"You're going to be fine, spider monkey. We were trained by the best and we trained you, which means you were trained by the best too," Andrei said, as he made her a cup of coffee.

She still looked slightly unsure, but she didn't say anything more about it. She looked up at Ivan, "we need to change your bandage again. It should be close to time to get an x-ray to see if the bone is healed enough you can take that stu pid sling off."

"Not looking forward to that and also looking forward to that," Ivan sald, winking at her.

"I'll be there the whole time. I'll make sure it's quick," she said, smiling broadly at him. We could see him relax as she smiled at him. There was definitely a stronger connection between those two since Ivan almost died. The rest of us could see it, but we didn't necessarily understand it.

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Chapter 192

Chapter One Hundred Ninety-Two

Adrik

Mike, Chris, and Keith were on time to the gym, which was a good sign. It was obvious that Mike didn't think he needed to be there, however. Chris and Keith seemed happy enough to be there. Keith even more so when he caught Stephen's eye. I couldn't help but smile to myself as I watched those two be awkward with each other.

Viktor informed them that they needed to have their skills assessed so he could see where their training needed to start.

"I told you the training I had, Viktor. You already know this," Mike said, a slight edge to his voice.

Sephie folded her arms across her chest, raising an eyebrow. Her hackles would go up anytime anyone was the slightest bit rude to one of us. It was, in fact, adorable.

"And I could tell you that I'm the Queen of England. Doesn't necessarily make it true," Sephie said. We all heard her tone of voice. We all instinctively took a step back from her.

Mike glared at her for a moment, but realized a second too late what he was doing. I stepped behind her, my gaze fixed on him. He quickly looked down.

Ivan, who was really enjoying this exchange, said, "make you a deal, Mike. If you can pass the test today, you don't have to continue with the training. If you can't, you get to start at the beginning."

While Chris and Keith knew that something felt a little off about Ivan's offer, Mike jumped at the chance. "Deal. This should be easy," he said.

Keith looked at him, surprised. "You don't even know what the test is yet, Mike."

"I don't need to. I'm sure I can pass it," he said with as much bravado as one man can have..

Sephie looked at Stephen. I couldn't see her expression, but he was smiling at her. They both said, "King Turd" in Russian, making each other laugh.

Viktor said, "if you can best Sephie in the ring, you can skip training, Mike. If you can't, then I don't want to hear another word out of you about training. Understood?" We all glanced at Viktor somewhat surprised. He rarely lost his cool, but we could hear the anger in his voice, even.

Mike laughed loudly. "You're not serious, right? You're really going to sacrifice your precious woman?"

Ivan looked at Mike, threateningly. "We're sacrificing you, you du mb fu ck."

That made Sephie laugh. She said, in Russian, "Super Squish, I kind of love you right now."

Mike still thought he had the clear advantage. He climbed into the ring, "alright, let's get this over with, but don't be mad at me when I mess up her pretty face and she's got nothing else going for her. I can't believe you guys are du mb enough to let me wreck her face."

We all saw it. The switch flipped. We knew that look. Mike was in trouble and didn't even know it. Even Chris and Keith saw it. Their eyes went wide as they watched her climb into the ring with Mike, I glanced at all the guys, who had stepped closer to the ring. They were all angry as well. Whatever happened, this was not going to end well for Mike today. It might be Mike's last day.

Viktor stepped in the ring, explained the rules to Mike, then moved to a corner to be out of the way. He stayed in to be able to pull her off Mike when needed, because we all knew that was coming.

Mike, still cocky as ever, walked toward Sephie. He thought his size was a clear advantage over her, which meant this was likely going to be over with quickly. She waited for him to throw the first punch, which she dodged easily. She didn't return a punchi either. He threw another, she dodged it, but waited. She's playing with him. My heart might've swelled in my chest a little as I felt pride watching her.

The third time Mike threw a punch, she dodged it, then returned a quick hit to his ribs. She was controlling her anger better than we'd ever seen her. Mike coughed once, but tried to play it off. "Is that all you got, sweetheart? It's going to take a lot more than a cheap shot to my ribs to take me down."

"Careful what you wish for, mo therfucker," Sephie said.

Her comeback only served to make him angrier. We watched as he lost control of it and his true side came out. He went on the offense once again, but she easily dodged most of his punches, never letting him land a square punch, making him even angrier that he couldn't get to her. She was still playing defense, but I got the sense that she was learning his moves and what to expect from him. She allowed him to think he was getting to her, testing his strength, but on her terms instead of his. She would let his punches land, but would deflect them enough that she really wasn't hurting from them.

"You seem to do a lot of running, little girl. This isn't really that much of a challenge," Mike said. While he said it wasn't a challenge, he was breathing heavier than she was. She wasn't even making a real effort yet. "You seem to think you can hang with the big boys, so why don't you fight like one?" he said, moving closer to her to begin his next assault.

She didn't give him time to comprehend what was happening. She switched to offense so quickly that it was hard to keep track of her movements, even for those us watching. She landed so many hits in such a short amount of time that he was stumbling. backward before he knew what was happening. He did manage to gain his footing and tried to stand his ground. He threw a punch that I thought for a split second was going to land squarely on her jaw. She moved at the last second, grabbing his arm, using it as leverage to lift herself higher. She landed a kick on his thigh, effectively taking his knee out from under him. She still had a hold of his arm as he went down. She bent his arm backward behind his back, making it almost impossible for him to get out of her hold. Any normal man would've realized he was beaten, but this was Mike and his ego couldn't let go yet.

His adrenaline kicked in, giving him a surge of energy. He jumped to his feet. Sephie let go of him as he jumped up, a smile on her face. Her cheeks were flushed, her breathing coming faster now. She walked to Viktor, pulling her shirt off and handing it to him. We saw Viktor say something quietly to her as he took her shirt. She simply nodded her head and walked back toward

Mike.

Misha said, loud enough for Mike to hear him, "you better be careful, Mike. She'll fu ck you up if you don't tap out next time."

Mike just glared at Misha, but said nothing. I glanced at Chris and Keith. Their jaws dropped when they saw Sephie's scars. I knew Mike had brought all her anger to the surface, if she was willing to show them her scars. I was glad to see it. She needed to know that her scars made her stronger, not weaker.

Mike looked at Sephie, now just in a sports bra. He was sweating, his breathing was heavy. He was clearly struggling more than she was. "You're taking your shirt off now to try and distract me? You can't spread your legs and use your sexual charms to get me to do your bidding like you do the rest of these guys. Unlike your harem of men, I don't want to take a ride on the village bike, little wh ore."

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Chapter 193

Chapter One Hundred Ninety-Three

Adrik

I felt my anger coming to the surface now. I made a move toward the ring. I don't know how Sephie knew, because she couldn't see me, but she looked to me immediately and put her hand up, signaling she was fine. I glanced to Ivan, who was just as angry as I was. This was going to be Mike's last day, regardless of how this turned out.

Misha, always the instigator, said to Sephie in Russian, "I warned him, gazelle. If you don't end him, we will." She turned to look at Misha. One side of her mo uth curled up into a half-smile and she winked at him. She was in total control.

Mike used her momentary lack of focus to launch his next attack. He rushed her, grabbing her, trying to take her to the ground. She used his momentum to flip him over and off her. He scrambled to his feet quickly, looking somewhat surprised. She didn't give him time to get his bearings. She was a flurry of hits and kicks, pushing him back toward the ropes. She landed every single punch and every single kick on him. His nose was likely broken at this point. He was going to have at least one black eye, maybe two. She landed one kick on his ribs and we all heard the crack. She heard it too and she focused on that area, landing multiple kicks, inflicting the maximum amount of pain. At this point, he could barely see. He could only try to protect his head and his torso as best he could. He still wouldn't give up, though.

She took out his knee again, causing him to go down once more. She paused, asking him, "wanna reconsider your opinion of me yet?"

He spit out blood toward her. "Fu ck you, wh ore." He mumbled something after that I didn't quite catch, but Sephie clearly did.

She delivered a kick straight to his head, causing him to crash to the mat as he lost consciousness. He might've been dead. I found myself not caring. Viktor walked to her with a towel to wipe Mike's blood off her with and handed her shirt back to her. I walked into the ring, standing next to her, looking down at Mike. I looked to Viktor, "he's done here. If he wakes up, make sure he understands he won't next time if I ever see him in this city again," I said.

Sephie looked at me. I could still see the anger in her eyes. It was almost like they had changed color. The brown in her eyes was more prominent and darker. The soft green and blue rings were almost non-existent. She looked intimidating. I found myself completely turned on by it. She looked to Viktor, then back at me. She said, in Russian, "he's done on this earth. He's not going to let this go, ever. He'll either spend the rest of his life trying to get to me or he'll run to Sal to tell him everything he knows about us. Or both. He can't walk out of this building."

Viktor looked at her, the look of a proud older brother on his face. "You both are assuming he's going to wake up. Ten bucks says he's already dead."

Chris and Keith walked into the ring. Chris went to check Mike's vitals as we were still standing over him. Keith looked at Sephie, saying, "I had no idea he had that much hatred for you, Sephie. He's always been a d ick to women, but this was a new level, even for him. He deserved every bit of that. He never would've stopped."

Chris looked at Sephie. "I hated that guy."

She raised an eyebrow. "Hated? As in past tense?"

He nodded his head. "No pulse. I think that last kick to the head did him in."

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She stood frozen for a moment. Her expression was blank. She then looked at Viktor, saying in English, "I guess I owe you ten bucks, Papa Bear."

Ivan, Andrel, Stephen, and Misha stepped into the ring as well. While they were trying to be somber, as they weren't sure how Sephle was going to handle knowing she just killed a guy, I could clearly see the pride on all their faces, She looked at them,

still in shock.

Ivan, ever the wise one, said, "Sephie, he sealed his fate the second he called you a wh ore. If you hadn't ended him, we would have. There was no walking out of here alive for him today. You just delivered his sentence, Princess." His face softened when he said that last sentence. It was exactly what she needed to hear as we watched the switch flip back. She walked quickly to him, wrapping her arms around his waist, burying her face in his good shoulder. He held her against him tightly with his good arm, whispering something to her that only she could hear. She took a deep breath and nodded her head, but kept her face in his shoulder. He had a small smile on his face as he said one more thing to her quietly that made her laugh. She looked up at him, tears in her eyes, but smiling. She reached up and kissed his cheek.

"Oh God I'm using my sexual charms again!" she said, dramatically. "Somebody please stop me."

We all erupted in laughter as we stood over Mike's body. A strange scene, for sure.

Misha caught her as she was walking back to me. He wrapped his arms around her, picking her up. "Please never stop, Gazelle. Never ever," he said. She giggled, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"I promise, my adorable Russian guardian," she said as he set her down.

I took Sephie upstairs while they guys dealt with everything in the gym. I took her straight to the shower, knowing she would want to get any and all traces of him off her as quickly as possible. She was quiet. I pulled her to me, the warm water running over both of us. I looked at her, trying to figure out what she was thinking. She looked at me, a questioning look in her eye. "What does it mean that I don't feel bad for what just happened? I felt the same standing over Mike as I did standing over my uncle. Completely void," she said. I could see the hint of fear in her eyes as she contemplated what she was capable of.

"Ivan was right, Sephie. He sealed his fate with ine when he said your pretty face was all you had going for you. Ivan too. It just kept getting worse as he got angrier. Do you believe me now that what's said in anger is someone's true feelings?" I asked, running my fingers through her wet hair.

She smiled sweetly at me, nodding her head. "He really didn't know when to sh ut up," she said. She turned around, leaning hack against me. She held her hands up, looking at the bruises that were already becoming visible. I massaged her shoulders, running my hands down her arms to grab her hands. I looked them over. The skin on her knuckles was broken in a few places and they were starting to swell and change colors as the bruising settled in.

"I have a trick to help this," I said, holding her hands gently in mine.

"From all those punching bags you used to break?" she asked, looking up at me.

I raised an eyebrow at her. "How do you know about that?"

"Tori told me about it. She said they thought you had anger issues because you were constantly breaking punching bags. That one was hard for me to believe, honestly," she said. She pulled my arms around her waist, leaning her head back against my shoulder.

"She was right. They used to have to keep an extra supply of bags because I went through them so quickly. I think I've only broken one bag since I met you, though." She looked up at me again, surprised. I smiled at her. "I told you, solnishko. You made that side of me go to sleep."

She chuckled. "Not entirely, though, I could feel your anger when Mike made the comment about my sexual charms,

I looked at her, now surprised. "Seriously? I did wonder how you knew I had made a move toward the ring

noticed it the other night when we were talking to Andy about the kidnapping attempt. It's like your anger feeds mine. 1

don't know how to describe it, but I could feel it then and I could feel it today." She turned to face me again, her eyes searching, worried I was going to think she was crazy for saying it out loud.

"You do read my mind already. I don't know why it would be any different that you can feel what I feel," I said, smiling at her. "It's one of the many things I love about you."

Chapter One Hundred Ninety-Four

Andrei

I've never seen Sephie get that angry and be able to control it so well. I knew she was going to be lethal once she learned how to control her anger and she proved it today. Mike didn't know what hit him. We all knew she'd been holding back, but I think it surprised everyone just how much she'd been holding back.

I glanced at Chris and Keith a few times, trying to gauge their reactions to watching their team member get obliterated by her. I knew there was a chance this could cause problems with them, and I wanted to be ready in the event it did. I caught Misha looking toward them too. I raised an eyebrow, silently asking if it would be okay once the inevitable happened. He got that faraway look in his eye, but quickly nodded his head. He said quietly, "I don't think they like him, either."

The greatest part of watching Sephie finally realize her potential was watching her improvise with Mike. She was playing with him for the first half, trying to make him think she was weaker than she is and keep him convinced he had the upper hand. It made me proud. Not only was she a formidable opponent physically, she was a formidable opponent me ntally as well. I had to say, I was happy to see her messing with his mind as much as possible. And I couldn't help but smile as I watched her try new things that we hadn't even taught her as she fought him.

Sephie's strength came from her legs. While she was quick with her punches, she was a woman. She'd never be able to deliver the same kind of punch that I could. It just wasn't physically possible. She knew that, which is why she'd started relying on her legs to deliver the most amount of damage when she'd train. Her kicks were just as fast as her punches, but with four times the power behind them. When she delivered the final kick to Mike's head, I knew he was done for. I'd been kicked by her when she was still holding back. I knew the power she could deliver even then. She was exponentially more powerful right now that she wasn't holding back.

Adrik walked into the ring, as Viktor walked to her with a towel. Mike had spat his blood on her at the end. We all made a move to jump in the ring as we saw her kick him. If she wouldn't have delivered that last bl ow, we would've been on him. You don't get away with calling her a wh ore with all of us standing there.

I noticed Chris and Keith walk into the ring. Chris went to check the vitals on Mike. Keith said something to Sephie, but I was watching Chris. I could see the look on his face when he couldn't find a pulse. He looked up and told Sephie that he'd hated that guy.

"Hated? As in past tense?" she asked.

"No pulse. I think that last kick to the head did him in," Chris said.

I looked to Misha. We both walked into the ring at the same time Iyan and Stephen did. None of us were sure how she was going to take this, but we were all incredibly proud of her.

Ivan and Sephie had grown infinitely closer since he was in the hospital. It was difficult to not be slightly jealous of their relationship now. She did a great job of spending equal amounts of time with all of us, but I always felt like she was slightly closer to me than the other guys. Now, Ivan had taken that spot. I felt si lly for feeling jealous, but I sometimes did. He looked at her, saying, "Sephie, he sealed his fate the second he called you a wh ore. If you hadn't ended him, we would have. There was no walking out of here alive for him today. You just delivered his sentence, Princess." The one good thing about he and Sephie growing closer is that Ivan was now just as good as Sephie at saying exactly what you needed to hear, exactly when you needed to hear it. I never knew that guy was so wise. He said exactly what she needed to hear, as we could see the switch flip back off and her face softened. She walked to him as he wrapped his massive arm around her. She always looked extra small next to one of us when she was any kind of upset. ile whispered something to her that we couldn't hear. She just nodded her head, but kept her face hidden in his shoulder. He smiled and said something else to her, causing her to laugh. We all know if we could make her laugh, It would generally make everything better. He knew the right thing to say to make her laugh. She reached up and kissed his cheek.

"Oh God I'm using my sexual charms again!" she said, dramatically, "Somebody please stop me."

We all laughed loudly. This one was going to stick around for a while. Somehow, we found ourselves standing over a dead man, laughing like it was a completely normal Monday morning.

Once Adrik and Sephie left, we got to work taking care of Mike's body. It wasn't the first dead body we'd had to dispose of. It wouldn't be the last.

I caught Viktor away from Chris and Keith. "What about Chris and Keith? Are you worried they'll be a problem after today?"

Viktor shook his head no. "I got the impression that both of them were happy about the outcome. Chris, especially. It might be a little more difficult for Keith, since he grew up with Mike. I think we should ask Stephen if he has any insight into that. And Misha."

"I already asked Misha when Sephie was still in the ring. But it might've changed now that he's dead," I said.

"I think those two will be fine. I'm a little more worried about Armando. Mike was his guy. I don't want to cause friction between him and Boss," Viktor said.

"Mando loves Sephie. We just have to tell him what Mike said to her and he won't care," I said.

"Once we get the body out of here, I think we all need to have a talk. Sephie is likely going to need some support after this too. I know this isn't the first person she's killed, but I want to make sure she's okay with what happened today," he said, a look of genuine concern on his face.

"Whatever Ivan said to her definitely helped. He should know how to best help her until we can talk to Boss." My mind was racing, thinking about the morning's events. I had so many ideas for her training now, but Viktor was right. We needed to make sure she was okay with everything that happened. It could go one of two ways. Either she was going to be fine and her training could reach a new level of seriousness, or this was going to set her back a little as she struggled to deal with it. I would need to talk to Ivan to find out how to make sure the former option happened.

Chapter One Hundred Ninety-Five

Andrei

Having to deal with dead bodies on a semi-regular basis meant we had a cleaning crew on standby. Not your normal cleaning crew, either. They could come in and make a place look as if nothing happened in under half an hour. It was one of the most amazing sights I'd ever seen, to be honest. They erased all traces of Mike from the gym in record time.

While the cleaners worked, we all gathered on the other side of the gym. It helped that Viktor and Misha weren't worried about Chris and Keith, but I still couldn't help but worry. I didn't want this to cause problems in the future, so I was glad Viktor wanted to talk to them right away.

My fears were put to rest almost immediately. Keith looked at Viktor, asking, "did you guys train her?" Viktor nodded. "And that's how you want to train us?" he asked. Viktor nodded again. "Yeah, I'm all the way in for that. She's unreal. But please don't make me fight her. I already know. I need to start at the beginning." His eyes were slightly wide, at the thought of going against Sephie.

Chris nodded his head in agreement. "Start me at the beginning too. I will happily admit that she can easily kick my ass. I've never seen anything like that in my life. Where did you guys find her? Like, clearly that girl has been through some shit, but holy hell it's just made her stronger. Is she immortal? Can she be killed? Because I don't think she can be." He looked up at all of us, looking at him seriously at the mention of her dying. "Oh shit. I ramble when I'm nervous. It's a real problem. Like I can't stop talking sometimes and I say stupid shit out loud. Please don't kill me. I didn't mean anything by it."

Ivan chuckled. "It's a legitimate question, if you knew what she's been through."

"Our job is to make sure we never find an answer to that question," I said. "Which also means your job is to make sure we never find an answer to that question. If there's a problem with that, we need to know now."

"Not in the slightest," Keith said. "I've only seen a glimpse, but I'm starting to understand what you all see in her."

"Nope, no problems here," Chris said. He looked to Viktor, a curious look on his face. "What are we going to do about replacing that asshole though?"

Viktor sighed. "I haven't decided yet. One of you can have his position."

Keith said, "if I may, and I don't want to speak for Chris, but it's painfully obvious to me now that my training is severely lacking comparatively. I would be fine with deferring to you guys for the time being until I catch up."

Chris again nodded in agreement. "Same for me too. I realized today that I have major holes in my training. But at least I can admit it, unlike that poor bastard."

"I did warn him she was going to fuck him up. People don't listen," Misha said, shaking his head in dramatic disgust. It made me laugh.

"I'll talk to Boss about it. We'll come up with a solution for Mando's security," Viktor said, "You guys are free to go. I know –Mando has meetings soon. He's going to need you."

They both nodded and left the gym. The rest of us stayed, needing to talk about what to do for Sephie. We stood in silence for a moment.

Ivan looked at the rest of us. "I think at this point she won't care that I told you guys. Sephie killed her uncle the night she got those scars. She had blocked it out until the night of the ball. When she was out on the plane, she relived that night. All of it. The beating, the whip, all of it. But this time, her memory let her remember everything. She sliced his Achilles' heel like she told all of us, but she stabbed him in the heart once he went down. She says she remembers standing over him and watching him die. He reached for her leg as he was struggling, but she picked her leg up out of his reach and stomped the knife further into his heart." He paused to look at our faces, Ivan enjoyed shocking us, so he wanted to drink this in for a moment. "I told Adrik that I had told Sephie her beast mode was activated that day she shot the guy in the face when they were trying to grab her. But then I said her beast mode has always been activated once he told me about her uncle. I think I was wrong both times. I think we just watched her beast mode activate for real today. I've never seen her so angry and yet so in control as she was today. We woke the beast and the beast is now fully under her control."

I couldn't help but feel excited about how her training would progress, assuming she handles the day's events well. "I have so many ideas on how to progress her training from here. Not even going to pretend I'm not excited about that."

Viktor smiled, but in his true reasonable fashion, said, "while I share in your excitement, we need to make sure she's okay with what happened today too. It could set her back and we don't want that."

I looked to Ivan. "You seem to know what she needs to hear about this. How do we help her through this?"

"I think she'll handle it better than you guys think. When I said that she just delivered his sentence? She said that to me when I told her about my past. She said, 'sometimes Karma uses you to deliver justice. You just handed down their sentences.' I think the more she hears that Mike wasn't walking out of here alive today, the more she'll accept it. I also reminded her that what's said in anger is the truth. Then I told her how thankful I was no broccoli was harmed today," he said, chuckling. Misha and I looked at each other laughing, remembering that awkward day with Tori in the kitchen at the house.

"I think she knows on some level that Mike never would've stopped. Before you guys walked into the ring, Boss had told me that Mike was done, but he was going to let him live. Sephie disagreed. She said he was never going to let this go and that he'd spend the rest of his life trying to get to her or that he'd run straight to Sal and tell him everything he knew. She was right. That's when I told her I bet her ten bucks he was already dead," Viktor said.

"She told me that day at the house that she felt nothing about killing her uncle. I think that might be the case here, too. We all know how emotional she can get when something is really bothering her. She feels her emotions very strongly. She was completely void of emotion standing there looking at him," Ivan said.

"She shouldn't feel anything about killing her uncle. Or Mike. They both had it coming," Misha said.

Stephen said, "we all heard her on the plane struggling against what her uncle used to call her. I think he and Mike were cut from the same cloth."

Ivan looked at him, his anger visible. "That's not even the half of it. He used to kick her in the stomach, calling her a whore. He would tell her he was making sure she wouldn't bring home another mouth to feed. One night, she hemorrhaged and couldn't stop bleeding. Her uncle thought she was having a miscarriage so he took her to a dirty doctor that would do back-room procedures for cash. The doc did an ultrasound and found scar tissue in her uterus from her uncle's repeated kicks to her stomach. Her uncle was convinced she had gotten pregnant, so he told the doctor to take her uterus. She pleaded with him not to, but she was 16. Her uncle had guardian rights over her, so the doctor did it anyway."

I felt my anger rise, as I cursed under my breath. I could clearly see the anger an everyone else's faces too. Misha said, "I still feel horrible about bringing that up. I was just trying to tease her. I had no clue that it would be that horrific." He ran his hand through his hair, his face turning red as he struggled to control his own emotions.

"You didn't know, Misha. She's not going to hold it against you," I said.

"I'm going to hold it against me," he said as he walked away from us. I started to go after him, but Ivan stopped me.

"Give him a minute. This is a lot and we all know he blames himself first," he said.

"Does anybody know who this doctor is?" Stephen asked.

"I haven't been able to find anything so far, but I've been looking into it. I haven't asked Sephie for specifics on where she lived with her uncle, but from what she's told us about her story, I've sectioned off a few areas of the city. I've got people trying to find out in each area if they know of a doctor that used to do those kinds of procedures. So far, I can't find anything," Ivan said. "But I'm not stopping until I find him."

"Good," we all said at once.

Chapter One Hundred Ninety-Six

Andrei

A couple of hours had passed and Sephie still hadn’t come back down from the penthouse. Viktor called Adrik to check on her. He told us to come up to the penthouse. We weren’t sure what to expect when we walked in, but she was curled up, half on Adrik, half beside him on the couch, sound asleep.

He put his finger up to his lips, indicating we should be quiet, but he motioned us to come and sit. “She didn’t sleep well last night and after we showered, she said she was really tired. I think her adrenaline wore off. We came in here and it didn’t take long at all before she passed out. I don’t want to move and risk waking her up right now.”

“She’s not having nightmares, is she?” I asked, suddenly concerned.

He shook his head no. “Not so far.” He pointed to her fingers, which were lightly moving on his chest. “She only does this when she’s dreaming happy dreams. I think she’s playing the piano, it’s always thythmic when she does it,” he said. He couldn’t help the smile that crept across his face as he watched her sleeping against him.

“That’s quite possibly the most adorable thing I’ve ever seen,” Misha said.

“How was she when you guys came upstairs?” Viktor asked.

Before he could answer, Ivan said, “I told them about her uncle. They know.”

Adrik nodded. “She said she feels much the same now as she did with her uncle. Completely void, I think were her exact words.”

We all looked at Ivan, who gave us all a smirk. Viktor spoke first, “what does she need from us? We want to make sure that she’s okay with what happened today. I don’t want it to set her back at all, either in her training or otherwise.”

Adrik looked to Ivan and said, “what Ivan said to her seemed to do the trick. I think we might need to remind her of that a few times, but I also think she knows this was the only outcome today.” He looked back to Viktor. “Did you tell them what she said right after?”

Viktor nodded. “I think she knows, too. I just want to make sure she believes it. We want to make sure she’s okay.”

Misha spoke up, “she said she missed the gardens at the house when we got her flowers the other day. Maybe she needs a day or two at the house. She seems like she can relax there. I think being able to go to the lake helps her recharge somehow.”

Adrik nodded. “We can go after tomorrow for the rest of the week. My schedule is empty the rest of the week. We can still keep working on the warehouse situation from there. Did we ever get a chef?”

Viktor laughed, but looked at the floor. “Nope. That’s my bad.”

We all laughed quietly. He really did love it love it when she cooked for us. Even Adrik laughed.

“What about Armando?” Viktor asked. “I don’t want this to cause problems between you and him. Mike was his guy, after all.”

“It won’t. Armando won’t question me and as much as I don’t want to take advantage of that, I’ll use it if I have to in this case, Adrik said. “I’m more worried about Chris and Keith. How were they?”

Ivan said, “I don’t think either one of them will be a problem. They both readily admitted that they weren’t at the same level as Sephle. Both said to please start them at the beginning because they both knew Sephle could kick their as ses easily.”

Viktor said, “neither of them wanted Mike’s position, either. At least not yet. They said they were happy to defer to us until they caught up in their training. We can have that discussion with Armando and find out what he wants to do about filling Mike’s position.”

Adrik ran his hand through Sephie’s curls as he thought about what Viktor and Ivan had just said. She made a muffled noise and snuggled into him closer. He looked down at her. “She’s probably going to be here a while.” He looked at Viktor, “can you reschedule my meetings this afternoon for tomorrow? I’m not leaving her today.”

I couldn’t help but smile at their relationship. My mind drifted off, wondering if I would ever find that kind of love in my lifetime. I’d never seen anything like it before, but I knew I wanted the same kind of love.

Sephie

Mike was on his knees in front of me. He could barely see. I think I broke his nose, based off the amount of blood gushing down his face. He still wouldn’t give up. “Wanna reconsider your opinion of me yet?” I asked, giving him one more chance.

He took a shallow breath. I know I broke his ribs. I heard the crack when I kicked him. He used all his breath to spit blood at me. “Fuc k you, wh ore.” I knew it was Mike that said those words. I was looking right at him when he said them. But my brain heard my uncle’s voice. He was coughing up his o own blood, in between trying to take shallow breaths because of his broken ribs. He looked at me and said one last thing, so quietly that I almost didn’t hear him. “Sicario.”

I don’t even remember moving to kick him, but I know I did because now I was standing over his motionless body. It didn’t even look like he was breathing. I just stared at him, completely numb. I glanced at my knuckles. They were sore. There was blood on them. Was it mine or his?

Viktor walked to me, handing me a towel to wipe Mike’s blood off me. He also handed me my shirt. I only vaguely remembered taking it off. Guess Chris and Keith are in the club now. I felt Adrik next to me, but I couldn’t see much except what was directly in front of me. I felt like I did the day that Misha and I were attacked, like I was waiting for the darkness to come. I knew Mike hadn’t landed a square hit, so I didn’t know why I felt like that.

I heard Adrik tell Viktor, “he’s done here. If he wakes up, make sure he understands he won’t next time if I ever see him in this city again.”

I stared at Mike’s body. He still hadn’t moved. It still looked like he wasn’t breathing, but nobody was checking to see if he was still alive. I looked at Adrik. I saw the surprise in his eyes when his eyes met mine, but it quickly turned to…lust? He held my gaze for a moment before he forced himself to look away. I looked to Viktor, then back to Mike’s motionless body. “He’s done on this earth. He’s not going to let this go, ever. He’ll either spend the rest of his life trying to get to me or he’ll run to Sal to tell him everything he knows about us. Or both. He can’t walk out of this building,” I said, in Russian, since Chris and Keith were still around.

Viktor looked at me, every bit the proud older brother. A slight smile crept across his face, like he wanted to beam at me, but was trying to hide it. “You both are assuming he’s going to wake up. Ten bucks says he’s already dead.”

I noticed Chris and Keith walk into the ring. Chris was the one that finally went to check Mike’s vitals. He seemed to be the only one concerned with that, but he waited several minutes, so he clearly wasn’t that concerned. Keith said something, but ! honestly wasn’t paying attention. I was watching Chris.

“I hated that guy,” Chris said, looking up at me.

“Hated? As in past tense?” I asked.

He nodded his head. “No pulse. I think that final kick to the head did him in,” he said.

Huh. So, I just killed a man and I felt strangely fine about it. Maybe it would hit me later, but right now, I felt very much the way I did when I killed my uncle. Completely void of everything. I feel nothing-

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I looked to Viktor. “I guess I owe you ten bucks, Papa Bear.”

I could see that the guys came into the ring, but I was still struggling to see correctly. I kept staring at Mike, like I wast expecting him to get up and curse at me for kicking his a ss. He’s not getting up. He’s never getting up again.

1 heard Ivan’s voice, but it took me a second to find him. “Sephie, he sealed his fate the second he called you a wh ore. If youl hadn’t ended him, we would have. There was no walking out of here alive for him today. You just delivered his sentence, Princess.” His voice softened when he said that last sentence, like he was trying to coax me out of the log he knew I was in. It worked. I could see more clearly. I walked quickly to him, just wanting to hide. I buried my face in his good shoulder as he held me tightly against him. He kissed the top of my head and whispered, “do you believe us now that what’s said in anger is the truth?” I nodded my head, but kept my face hidden. I felt the tears coming now. He squeezed me tighter, then whispered, “I’m just glad no broccoli was harmed today.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. I looked up at him, his handsome smile across his face, clearly relieved that I had laughed. They knew if they could make me laugh, it was generally going to be okay. I stood on my toes and kissed his cheek, thankful he knew what to say to snap me back to reality. Then I remembered what Mike had said to me.

“Oh God I’m using my sexual charms again!” I said as dramatically as possible. “Somebody please stop me.”

And just like that, we were standing over a dead body, laughing like it was the most normal thing ever, forgetting completely the severity of the situation. “Normal is completely overrated anyway. *

Chapter One Hundred Ninety-Seven

Sephie

Adrik took me upstairs, straight to the shower. My muscles were starting to feel sore already. My hands hurt, too. I had blood on my hands, literally and figuratively, but I didn’t know if it was mine or his at this point.

Adrik pulled me under the warm water, which helped my muscles relax. I looked at him, thinking about what had just happened and how confusing it was to not feel how I thought I was supposed to feel. “What does it mean that I don’t feel bad for what just happened? I felt the same standing over Mike as I did standing over my uncle. Completely void.”

I watched his eyes as I talked. No change. He looked at me the same as always. He ran his finger over my face, saying, “Ivan was right, Sephie. He sealed his fate with me when he said your pretty face was all you had going for you. Ivan too. It just kept getting worse as he got angrier. Do you believe me now that what’s said in anger is someone’s true feelings?”

1 smiled up at him. I knew he hadn’t heard Ivan tell me that in the gym, but I know I needed to hear it a second time. “He really didn’t know when to sh ut up,” I said, turning around so I could lean back against him. I looked at my hands under the water. Turns out some of the blood was mine, some was his. I had split my knuckles in a few places. They were starting to swell, too, and turn pretty colors that knuckles shouldn’t display. Adrik ran his hands down my arms, grabbing each of my hands in his. He inspected both, then said, “I have a trick to help this.”

I looked up at him, curious. “From all those punching bags you used to break?” I still found it amusing when I thought about what Tori had told me about Adrik that first weekend at the house.

He looked surprised. “How do you know about that?”

“Tori told me about it. She said they thought you had anger issues because you were constantly breaking punching bags. That one was hard for me to believe, honestly,” I said, still remembering how surprised I was at Tori’s revelation. I pulled his arms around my waist, loving the extra warmth that his body provided when it was against mine.

“She was right. They used to have to keep an extra supply of bags because I went through them so quickly. I think I’ve only broken one bag since I met you, though.” He smiled at me when I looked up at him again, completely surprised. “I told you, solnishko. You made that side of me go to sleep.”

I remembered feeling his anger when I was in the ring with Mike. I laughed. “Not entirely, though. I could feel your anger when Mike made the comment about my sexual charms,”

It was like it was almost a living thing that I could feel almost envelope me. He looked surprised. “Seriously? I did wonder how you knew I had made a move toward the ring.”

“I noticed it the other night when we were talking to Andy about the kidnapping attempt. It’s like your anger feeds mine. I don’t know how to describe it, but I could feel it then and I could feel it today.” I realized how crazy what I had just said out loud sounded. I turned to face him again, slightly worried. I searched his eyes, but he just smiled down at me.

*You do read my mind already. I don’t know why it would be any different that you can feel what I feel. It’s one of the many things I love about you.”

I stood on my toes, pressing my lips to his. I wanted more, but my body felt like it had been hit by a truck. I felt like I just wanted to sleep the rest of the day. I turned around again, leaning back against him as it was both warmer and easier to remain standing when I was leaning against him.

“I’m really tired,” I said.

“Come, let’s get you dressed then,” he said, turning the water off.

He talked me into resting on the couch for a bit with him before he had to go back downstairs for his meetings that afternoon. I laid down between him and the back of the couch, laying across his chest so I’d be plenty warm. I tried to stay awake as long as I could, but I think I lasted all of one minute once his fingers started playing with my still damp curls.

I woke up later, still laying across his chest. He was snoring softly, his arms wrapped around me. I lifted my head to look at him, which caused him to wake up. He looked down at me, smiling. “Feel better after your nap?” he asked.

I looked out the windows, noticing it was sometime in the afternoon. I nodded. “Why didn’t you’ wake me up? What about your meetings this afternoon?” I asked.

“The guys came up to check on you after you fell asleep. I had Viktor push everything to tomorrow. I didn’t want to leave you,” he said, pushing a stray curl back from my eyes.

“They came up here and I didn’t wake up?” I asked, surprised.

He chuckled. “They were here for like an hour or more and you didn’t wake up.”

“Oh,” I said, completely surprised that I had slept through that.

“Adrenaline crashes are no joke, solnishko. We’ve all been there. They were concerned about you, then they were concerned you were going to have nightmares when they found out you were sleeping. I showed them how you play piano on my chest when you’re happy sleeping.” He had one of my curls and was twirling it around his finger as he talked.

“I do what?”

“You play piano on my chest. Your fingers move in a rhythmic pattern, like you’re playing songs, when you’re happy sleeping. You also make a cooing noise when I run my fingers through your hair. It makes you snuggle into me more every single time. Not gonna lie, I do it a lot,” he said, running his fingers through my hair, making goosebumps rise over my entire body.

“It’s probably because you give me goosebumps when you do it,” I said, grinning at him,

“It’s one of my favorite things,” he said, kissing my forehead.

“You’re my favorite thing,” I said, wrapping my arms around him tighter, resting my head on his chest again. I heard him inhale deeply.

My stomach chose that moment to announce that she was feeling ignored. We both laughed at how obnoxiously loud my stomach was.

“You haven’t eaten since this morning. It’s also a side effect of the adrenaline crash. You feel like you could eat a house,” he said as we got up from the couch.

I stretched, my stomach growling loudly again. “Or two, apparently,” I said, laughing.

He grabbed my hand, pulling me toward the kitchen. “Come, we got you Vinny’s.”

This really is true love. It’s official,” I said, hugging him tightly as we walked toward the kitchen.

Chapter One Hundred Ninety-Eight

Sephie

“Are you up for some company?” Adrik asked after I inhaled my sandwich.

“The guys are still worried?” I asked, smiling.

“All of them but Andrei. He’s probably got a new training plan made out for you already, but he does want to make sure you’re okay with everything before he starts it.” He couldn’t help but laugh.

“Bubba loves being my trainer. He’s good at his job, too.” I smiled to myself thinking about Andrei being excited for starting new things in my training. “Tell them they can come over. I don’t want to be responsible for any of them sleeping poorly tonight.”

It wasn’t five minutes later and they all walked into the penthouse.

“You guys have been waiting for me to wake up, haven’t you?” I asked as they walked into the kitchen.

“Maybe,” Stephen said, wrapping his arms around my shoulders from behind. He squeezed my shoulders, surprising me by kissing my cheek. Stephen was the least affectionate of the guys, normally. He took a while to warm up to me, but it seems like since he was able to tell the guys what’s he’s been holding back all this time, he’s gotten more comfortable in his own skin. I was happy to see it.

“Did you eat yet, spider monkey?” Andrei asked.

“If by eat, you mean inhale, then yes. Yes, I did. My soul is now returning to my body,” I said, laughing. “I can already tell I’m going to be hungry again in like an hour.”

Adrik looked at me, smirking. “Told you you’d want to eat a house.”

“It’s a real thing,” Ivan said. “We’ve all been there.”

Viktor’s phone rang. He pulled it out of his pocket, looking at the number. He clearly didn’t recognize the number, so he stepped away to answer the phone.

“Super Squish, we should do your bandage while I’m awake and not eating. It’s a very small window today, we should take advantage,” I said. He nodded, laughing. He walked to the door to go get the bandage supplies from downstairs.

Viktor walked back toward where I was sitting, handing me the phone. “It’s Chen,” he said.

“Oh!” I took his phone and put it on speaker so they could all hear. “Chen, what’s going on, man?*

“Hey my girl. Sorry I didn’t call yesterday like I said I would. I didn’t get done until super late and forgive me for not wanting to disturb your giant secretary at like 2 am.”

“No worries, Chen. He appreciates that. What did you find out?” I asked.

He sighed. “It’s Interesting.” He paused, which made me look up at all the guys. “You know I told you one of my dealers works for Vito, right? Well, he didn’t know anything about it. He was also pi ssed off to find out they’re planning on trying to replace the entire supply with that sh it. He won’t touch it either. That fo ol is hot-headed, too. He was ready to sh oot somebody when I talked to him last night. That’s partly why I got done so late. I was calming him down.”

“Thank you for not allowing him to sho ot anyone last night. The public thanks you for your service, Chen,” I said, trying not to laugh.

He laughed on the other end. “I’m a public servant, Sephie. We know this.” More laughter. “So, then I go to my guy that works for Sal. I’m careful with both of them, like you can’t just come out and ask them what they know like you did with me, I hint around, trying to find out if he knows anything about brawn and that mo therfucker thinks I know about the plan and he proceeds to talk about how fu cked up the entire deal is.”

“So, the guy that works for Sal knows everything, but the guy that works for Vito doesn’t?” I asked.

“Right. The guy that works for Sal not only knows everything, but they’re getting a heads up when it’s going down, so they know not to sell in Sal’s area of the city. He said they’re supposed to lay low for the weekend when it happens. Sal is paying them all to stay off the streets when it happens.”

“Does he know when it’s going to happen?” I asked. I glanced up to see if any of the guys had anything to add, only to find a sea of clenched jaws.

“He didn’t know. He just said they’ll get the word and then the next weekend they’re supposed to stay off the streets in Sal’s part of town. No selling anything in that part of town that weekend.”

“How good of a relationship do you have with this guy? Like, do you think he would tell you when he gets the word?”

“I mean, he already thinks I know about everything to begin with, so probably.”

I was quiet for a minute. “What about the guy that works for Vito and your other guy that works for the Colombian? Do you know how connected they are to other dealers in the city?”

He was quiet for a minute, exhaling loudly. “The guy that works for the Colombian is pretty high up. He likely knows a lot of other dealers. The guy that works for Vito, I don’t know. Like I said, he’s really hot-headed, so I keep my time with that guy short, if you catch my meaning.”

“You’re good with the guy that works for the Colombian?” I asked. If he could get word to Trino’s people, that was a large portion of the dealers in the city.

“Yeah, that dude is cool. Super laid-back as long as you play by his rules. Break one of his rules, he breaks you,” he said.

I laughed. “That’s not him, that’s his boss.” I looked at Adrik, who nodded in agreement.

“I still want to know how you know that, and yet, I don’t want to know how you know that,” Chen said.

“Chen, do you think there are enough dealers that are against selling brawn that would also be willing to help us try to stop this plan?” I asked.

“Hmmm. I don’t know. I can put feelers out. The guy that works for Vito is down to ki ll some people, but I don’t know how helpful that will actually be to your cause. I’m not vouching for his aim, in other words. The other two, I don’t know about. He ll, you seem to know more about the guy that works for the Colombian than I do,” he said, laughing.

I was still looking at Adrik, who quietly said, “Trino’s guys will help us.”

“Yeah, that guy will help. What about Sal’s guy? What were his thoughts on the plan?”

He sighed again. “I couldn’t get a good read on him. It was like he was excited about it, but I think he was more excited for getting paid to do Jack sh it over one weekend. I don’t know what his thoughts are on selling brawn in general.”

“Chen, I ha te to ask more of you, but can you find out how many more dealers would be against this? Any of the dealers that work for the Colombians will be against it and should be helpful to you. Tell them you know Trino, if they give you sh it. If it goes any farther than that, drop my name and have them check with Trino. You’ll be fine when it comes to them. If they’re working for Armando, you’ll be fine. If they’re working for any of the other bosses, do not under any circumstances say my name. Got it?”

“My girl. What the fu ck are you into now,” Chen said, seriously.

“Eh, we don’t have that kind of time. I’ll explain one day. Just remember, Colombians are fine, Armando is fine, anyone else means you don’t know me. Call this number if you get in trouble. Okay?”

“Got it. I’ll call you in a couple days once I have time to talk to more people.”

“Be careful, Chen.”

“Always, my girl.” He ended the call. I got up, handing Viktor his phone. Ivan had come back in during my conversation with Chen. I grabbed the bandage supplies from him and pulled him toward a vacant spot on the kitchen counter. I took his sling off and started to cut his bandage off, thinking about everything that Chen had said.

“I can tell Trino to let his dealers know that Chen is a friendly. I’m more worried about him saying your name around one of the other dealers than any of Trino’s guys,” Adrik said.

“Chen is smart. He knows I wouldn’t have said anything if it wasn’t important. It also took Chen a solid year before he would even tell me his name. I told him about his cheating girlfriend before he had told me his name. I think that’s why he eventually told me his name. He knows the importance of being anonymous,” I said, inspecting Ivan’s stitches.

I looked at Ivan. “Want to let them air for a bit? That bandage has to be getting old by now.”

“You are not kidding,” he said. He stretched his arm gingerly.

“We should make you an appointment for an x-ray this week to see how healed you are. The stitches look really good. Those might be able to come out at the same time,” I said, watching him to make sure he didn’t accidently use his arm too much.

“We thought you might want to go to the house this week, gazelle. You said you were missing the gardens the other day.” Misha

said.

“I did say that,” I said, smiling at him. They surprised me sometimes with how much they could remember about what I said and did. “When were we planning on going to the house?”

“After tomorrow, we can go. Since I pushed everything from today to tomorrow, I have a long day. But we can go Wednesday and stay through the weekend, if you like,” Adrik said.

I walked to him, feeling guilty for keeping him trapped underneath me on the couch for the afternoon, since it meant his day would be even longer tomorrow. “Totally my fault. I wasn’t planning on trapping you on the couch,” I said, as I tucked myself into his side.

He looked down at me, holding me close. “I could think of much worse ways to spend the afternoon, solnishko.” He smiled at me, as I looked up at him.

I looked to Ivan, “we should get you x-rayed tomorrow then. Make it easy while we’re still here. I ha te to take advantage of the trauma that pool hospital is likely still experiencing, but I think we can convince them, nicely, to work you in tomorrow.”

Adrik said, “that hospital gets very large donations from one of my companies. They’ll do whatever you need, solnishko,”

“I love it when a plan comes together,” I said, smiling up at him.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 199

Chapter One Hundred Ninety-Nine

Sephie

Stephen and Viktor came to the hospital with me and Ivan the following morning to get Ivan's arm x-rayed. Dr. Williams was expecting us, probably with an extra dose of anxiety meds for his entire staff. Ivan was quiet on the ride there. I knew he was nervous.

I slid my arm through his good arm when we walked in. Since they knew we were coming, a nurse took us to see Dr. Williams immediately.

"Dr. Williams, thanks for working us in," I said, somewhat ironically, since I knew he basically had no choice.

"It's good to see you again. I can't tell you how relieved I am to see you, if I'm being honest," he said, shaking my hand.

I couldn't help but laugh. The trauma was still fresh, clearly. He got to work quickly, as I'm sure he wanted to get us out of there as quickly as possible. Viktor and Stephen had walked into the room with us, but both stepped out once the doctor started to take Ivan's bandage off. I looked at Ivan, curiously, but he just winked at me. They were working on something else, obviously.

I didn't let go of Ivan's hand the entire time the doctor was looking at his arm. "It looks like it's healed really well. The stitches can come out. We just need to x-ray the arm to see how the bone has healed, but the break in the bone was the least of your worries that day," Dr. Williams said. He looked to me, a puzzled look on his face. "I'm not sure how to do this x-ray. You can't be with him."

"Why not?" I asked. I could feel my anger starting to rise.

"Women need to limit their exposure to x-rays as much as possible. Especially if there's a possibility you could be pregnant. It's dangerous," he said.

I just laughed. "No worries there, Doc."

He looked at me, still concerned. "You still could be without knowing. It's too big of a risk."

I could feel my anger starting to rise. Ivan squeezed my hand tighter. I looked at the good doctor, very seriously. "I don't have at fucking uterus, doc. There's no go ddamn chance. Can we get the x-ray now, please?"

He looked stunned, but his medical curiosity got the better of him. "You're so young. Why?"

Ivan said, his voice strained, "it was not by choice. One of your kind took it against her will." I almost laughed when Tvan said "your kind" to the doctor, like he and all other doctors were a completely different species. In his mind, they likely were.

The doctor looked at both of us, his face dropped. He glanced to the open door. "Are those other two men coming back?"

"Eventually, yes," Ivan said.

Dr. Williams got up quickly and shut the door. He sat down in front of us again. "Tell me what happened. It was a back-room procedure for cash, no? I've been hearing stories like this for years. I've been trying to find this doctor, but he moves around to different parts of the city, so it's been impossible to track him down. He has an entire unit of police dedicated to finding him."

I looked at Ivan, my eyes wide. He squeezed my hand, his face softer. He nodded toward the doctor, indicating I should tell him what happened. I sighed. i told the doctor the short version of the story about my uncle and what happened that night. When I finished, Dr. Williams had tears in his eyes.

"I remember you told me that doctors were the reason for his reactions in the operating room. I had no idea that you also had reason to hate us. It makes what you did that day even more poignant," he said, looking at me with pure sympathy in his eyes,

"To be clear, I did it for him, not you," I said. Ivan let go of my hand and wrapped his good arm around my shoulders.

"Do you remember anything about the doctor? Where he was when this happened? A name? A physical description? It's hard for most of the people he's worked on to remember what he looks like. I'm not sure what cocktail he uses on people, but it seems like he wipes their memory," he asked.

"Oh, I remember," I said.

Ivan looked at me, then at Dr. Williams. "Whatever drugs he used on her likely didn't work the same on her as other people. Redheads are different. She said she remembers being out for a really long time after the procedure. He probably had to change his cocktail for her."

Dr. Williams looked at Ivan, completely surprised. "How do you know that redheads are different? There are doctors that don't even know that."

"You don't want to know, Doc. Trust me," I said.

He nodded. "We'll abandon that line of questioning, no problem.

"I don't remember the doctor's name. I don't think they ever said his name. They just called him "doctor" the whole time. But I'll never forget what he looks like," I said. I shuddered, thinking about his face.

"Can you give a description to a sketch artist you think? I've talked to hundreds of people that have been traumatized by this man over the years and not a single one of them can remember his face. You are the only one I've found so far," he said.

I looked at Ivan. He could see the fear plainly on my face. He said to me, in Russian, "I've been looking for this guy, too. Ever since you told me what happened. That's why Stephen and Viktor left. They're asking the other doctors what they know about this guy. It might be useful to find out what the police know about him, but you don't have to do anything you don't want to do."

I felt the shaking start in my body as I looked at him, answering in Russian, "I'll do it, but we need to get on with this or won't be able to walk out of here."

Ivan pulled his phone out of his pocket, called a number, let it ring once then ended the call. Within two minutes, Viktor and Stephen were back in the room with us. Ivan looked at the doctor. "Give us the information for the police unit you're working with. We'll make sure she gives the description of him, but we need to get that x-ray so we can get out of here. If she goes, I go and nobody wants that," he had a sense of urgency to his voice that made it clear to Dr. Williams that we needed to move fast.

He nodded his head. He stood up, "follow me."

As we walked to the x-ray room, Ivan explained what was happening to Viktor and Stephen. I still had a hold of Ivan's hand, but Viktor reached down and grabbed my other hand as we walked down the hallway. Dr. Williams set Ivan up in front of the x- ray machine. He had a lead vest that he gave me to put on so I could stand next to Ivan. He took a few x-rays, then walked back and adjusted Ivan's arm to get a different perspective. The entire process was over in just a few minutes.

"It takes around 10 minutes to get the films, but I'll hurry it along as much as I can," Dr. Williams sald as he led us back to the original room we were in. He left us, telling us he would be back as quickly as he could be.

I still had a hold of Ivan's hand, both of our hands in my lap. He could feel the shaking in my legs starting to get worse the longer we stayed. He looked to Stephen, asking, "any tricks to help make this better until we get out of here?"

Chapter Two Hundred

Sephie

Stephen thought for a moment. “Boss is the only thing I’ve seen stop it for her. His touch seems to calm it down.”

I looked at both of them. “I’ll be okay. It goes away after a while, but I never know how bad it will get first. Sometimes I lose control of my body when it gets really bad. That’s what I’m trying to avoid.”

Viktor moved behind me, his giant hands on my shoulders. He didn’t say a word, he just calmly stood there like he was willing my trauma to calm down. I took a deep breath. It did actually help.

Dr. Williams walked back into the room with the x-ray films in his hand. He handed Stephen a card, as well. “That’s the police unit I’m working with. Each time I hear of a new person who’s come in contact with that doctor, I send them there,” he said as he clipped the films on the wall to look at them. He looked at them, looked at Ivan, then looked at the films again. He scratched his head, then turned to look at Ivan. “Your break is completely healed. Not only that, but I can’t even tell where it was to start with. That’s virtually unheard of except in very young children.” He looked to me, grabbing scissors from a drawer at the side of the room. He sat on a stool and rolled himself to Ivan. “Let’s get the stitches out so you can leave.”

He worked quickly, telling Ivan that he still needed to be careful with his arm. “Have you had any pain in your arm lately?”

I couldn’t help but laugh. I looked at Ivan, asking in Russian “have you had any pain in your arm ever?” Viktor squeezed my shoulders as he laughed quietly behind me. Ivan grinned at me, but looked at the doctor completely straight-faced, “nope, Doc. It’s felt great. You do great work.”

As he pulled out the last of Ivan’s stitches, he said, “okay, well take it easy for another week or so and then you can start to use it more. It’s healed. It’s healed better than I’ve ever seen an injury like that heal in such a short time, so I think you’ll be fine.” He looked to me. “And please, give the police unit a call. You’re the only one that knows what he looks like. We’ve been trying to get him for over ten years now.”

I nodded my head. I went to say something, but Viktor answered for me. “We’ll make sure it’s taken care of, Doc.” His giant hands were still gently resting on my shoulders. He was the calming presence I needed to keep the shaking from getting too bad. Ivan squeezed my hand as he pulled us both up.

“Thanks, Doc,” Ivan said as we all quickly walked out of the room. In the hallway, Ivan looked down at me, “you okay, princess?”

I nodded my head. “Papa Bear helped in there. He kept the shaking from getting worse.” I felt Viktor silently grab my other hand as we walked quickly down the hallway to the exit.

We were back to the penthouse in record time. Once in the elevator, Viktor told me he was taking me to Adrik’s office. I looked to Ivan, still worried about him. “No, Papa Bear, I’m okay. I promise. I screwed up his schedule yesterday. I don’t want to screw it up two days in a row. We can go to the penthouse. I’ll be okay, it’s getting better. I promise,” I said, trying to convince him not to interrupt Adrik.

He looked at me skeptically, but relented. “Then you’re stuck with us for a little longer until I’m sure you’re okay. You’ve had a rough couple of days, sestrichka.”

“I’m surprisingly okay with what happened yesterday. Like, I might be a psychopath I’m so okay with it,” I said. I looked at all of them, gauging their reactions to what I said.

Stephen started to say something, but the doors dinged and started to open. He was waiting until we were in the penthouse before he said anything. Before he could speak, I said, “wait a minute, there’s something I need to do.” I still had a hold of Ivan’s hand. I stopped him and opened my arms for him to give me a real, two-armed hug. “I freaking need this,” I said quietly as I wrapped my arms around his waist. He wrapped both of his giant arms around me and held me tightly as I rested my head on his chest. I inhaled deeply, feeling my body relax a little more.

I stepped back from him, unexpected tears in my eyes. “I can’t tell you guys how nice it is to feel safe with you. Like life-changing and that’s not just me being overly dramatic, even though I do enjoy that,” I said, trying to laugh to keep the tears from falling. I felt Viktor’s giant arm around my shoulders, pulling me to him. Once again, he said nothing. He just held me tightly for a moment.

Stephen said, “Sephie, you realize you do the same for us, right?” I tried to peak over Viktor’s shoulder at Stephen, who was still behind Viktor, but he was too tall. I turned him so I could see Stephen without letting go of Viktor.

“I do not realize that, Yoden. What do you mean?” I asked.

“Yoden?” he said, looking at me skeptically.

“Yoda and Stephen. Yoden. Come on, not all nicknames stick the first time. Give me a break here. I’m just throwing things out there, seeing what sticks,” I said, laughing.

He just shook his head as he said, “we give you physical security, but you give us emotional security. It’s the classic masculine/feminine dynamic. We give you a space where you feel safe physically which allows you to give us a space where we feel secure emotionally. So, while you’re grateful to us for making you feel safe, we feel exactly the same toward you.”

My eyes went a little wide as he was talking. I stepped back from Viktor to look at him and Ivan. They both nodded in agreement with what Stephen said. I thought for a moment, chewing on my bottom lip, not knowing how to respond. I looked at Stephen sideways, “so you’re telling me, this whole time, it wasn’t my sexual charms?”

He laughed. “You know those things don’t work on me, right? I have immunity.”

I looked at him, in feigned disbelief. “My milkshake does not bringeth all the boys to the yard?”

That got a loud laugh out of all of them. Stephen walked to me, pulling me into a hug. “Seph, you’re just the best.”

Viktor and Stephen stayed with me and Ivan in the penthouse for a while longer. I think they were enjoying the break. Eventually, Viktor’s phone pulled them away, leaving Ivan and I alone. He looked at me, a serious look on his face.

“Uh oh, Super Squish. Shit’s about to get real,” I said, grinning at him.

“About this doctor that did your procedure. I’ve run into nothing but dead ends. If you can give me a description of him, I can see if that helps jog people’s memories. People have heard of him, but no one knows details,” he said.

“What about the police?” I asked.

“We should talk to Adrik about that. He’s close with the police commissioner. He should be able to get us the information this unit has on this guy, but they’re going to want that description in exchange.” He thought for a moment, looking at me. “We can do things the police can’t, princess, but they don’t give up information for free. They need to still feel important,” he said, chuckling.

I nodded in understanding. “Have you talked to any prostitutes or their pimps? I’m almost certain that’s how my uncle knew about this guy. I think he mostly does abortions for prostitutes. My uncle’s friend that knew about the doctor was a pimp. He would come to the house occasionally, but I would always leave when he was there. He gave me the creeps.”

“Do you remember that guy’s name? We might be able to find him, Ivan asked. He reached up with his previously bandaged arm to run his hand over his goatee like his arm hadn’t been in a sling for weeks.

“Only his street name. His girls used to call him Chucky and that’s all I ever heard my uncle call him. I don’t think that was his real name though,” I said.

“It’s a start,” he said. “Are you sure you’re up for talking to the police about this?”

I looked down, my hands starting to fidget in my lap. I thought for a moment, then looked back up at his concerned face. “I can do it if it means finding this guy. There’s no telling what else he’s done to other people.” I paused, then added, “but you guys are gonna have to go with me. I might not be able to avoid screwing up Adrik’s schedule that day.”

“His schedule is the least of his worries when it comes to you, princess. He’s going to be mad at us for not bringing you to his office today once he finds out. He’s told us all before, nothing else matters without you.”

“Shut up.”

He thought for a moment. “I think the first time he told us that was when we were at the ranch house in Italy. When you were passed out and he couldn’t leave you or you’d get sucked back into your nightmare. I went into the room the morning we were supposed to leave and told him we’d all decided we couldn’t leave. He agreed and said nothing was more important than you. His empire is replaceable, princess. You are not.”

I sat, somewhat stunned, for a moment. I didn’t know how to respond. Luckily, Misha came into the penthouse and saved me from having to.

“Gazelle, are you hungry yet? Because I’m starving and we can’t decide what to get for lunch, so you’re the deciding vote,” Misha said, his broad smile stretched across his face. He sat down next to me, his arm around my shoulders.

“What are the choices? Do any of them involve a burrito the size of my head? Because if they do, that’s what gets my vote,” I said.

He leaned over, kissing my cheek, “this is why you’re the best, Sephie. Be back shortly with a burrito the size of your head.” My stomach growled loud enough for them to hear. They both looked at me, pretending to be shocked.

“What? Sometimes my stomach feels neglected and needs to be included in the conversation. She has a mind of her own,” I said, laughing.

Chapter Two Hundred One

Sephie

Everyone came to the penthouse for lunch, including Adrik. I wasn't expecting him to have a break in his day. He clearly enjoyed my excitement to see him, holding me in front of him long enough to calm down so the guys wouldn't also see how much he enjoyed my excitement.

He looked down at me, concern plainly in his eyes, "what's this about you going to the police, salnishko? Are you sure you want to do that?"

I chewed on my bottom lip, but nodded. "Ivan thinks it would be helpful to get the information the police have on that guy. It might help find him. Apparently, nobody else can remember what he looks like, but I can clearly remember his face." | shuddered again, seeing his face flash in my memory. Adrik pulled me closer, feeling it.

"I'll call the commissioner this afternoon and find out what he knows about this police unit that's trying to find the doctor. We can have them come here. I don't like the idea of you going to a police station," he said, kissing my forehead.

I heard Viktor's deep voice behind us. "That's a better idea. You're going to need to be there with her, Boss. We had to rush out of the hospital before her shaking got too bad."

Adrik clicked his tongue. "Why didn't you come to me when you got back?" I looked up at him. He looked almost angry,

"I was okay. Viktor helped keep it from getting worse when we were at the hospital. I screwed up your day yesterday. I didn't want to do it two days in a row," I said, apologetically.

His eyes softened. "My schedule doesn't take priority over you, solnishko."

Ivan said, "told you." I didn't even look in his direction, I just snapped my fingers and pointed in his direction. I could hear him laughing.

He looked over my head to Viktor. "You really helped?"

Viktor shrugged his shoulders, a somewhat worried look on his face. "I don't think it was the same as you, but it kept it from getting worse, which is what we were worried about."

Adrik took a deep breath and visibly relaxed. Viktor looked at him, puzzled. "You're not mad?"

Adrik laughed. He looked down at me as he answered Viktor. "No, the opposite, really. It makes me worry less to know that she has someone else who can help if needed." I smiled up at him, watching as he tried to hide his heart skipping a beat.

We were in Adrik's office at the end of the day, waiting for someone from the police department to show up so I could give them a description of what the doctor looked like. Adrik had called the commissioner after lunch. He knew about the doctor and said they'd been trying to catch the guy for a decade. He said the same thing as Dr. Williams; no one could remember what he looked like. Adrik told him that I could remember and the commissioner said he would send someone out that night. He also told Adrik that they could have all the information the police had on the guy.

"He told me that we had free rein to find this guy. He said his people have been looking for him for a decade and they'd only run into dead ends. He was still operating in the city, as they met new victims regularly. Apparently, he's gotten worse as the years have progressed. He's moved on to even darker things," Adrik said as we were waiting

Misha asked.

"He's into organ harvesting row. The hospitals are reporting people showing up with missing organs, with no memory of how it happened," Adrik said.

"For real? I thought that was just an urban legend," I said.

"According to the police commissioner, it's real. He hasn't released that info to the public yet, but he said it's been happening more frequently lately," he said.

"Just when I thought things couldn't possibly get any worse," I said, mostly to myself.

Viktor's phone rang. He got up, walking out of the office. He returned a moment later with one uniformed police officer, one plain clothes officer, and a third with a sketch pad in his hands. Adrik stood, walking toward them. He extended his hand to all three. "Thank you for coming on such short notice," he said. He motioned for them to sit.

"We should be thanking you, sir. We've been chasing this guy for years and never found anyone that can remember what he looks like. We still haven't been able to figure out what drugs he uses to wipe memories. They're out of the victims' systems quickly, which makes it impossible for us to test them," the plain clothes officer said, taking a seat across from the couch I was

1.

When Adrik got up to greet them, I moved closer to Andrei, who was on the other side of me on the couch. I was scared. He wrapped his arm around my shoulders while I curled up next to him, wanting to hide. He held me against him tightly. "You'll be okay, spider monkey. We'll protect you," he whispered to me.

The plain clothes officer looked at me. "You must be Sephie," he said. I nodded. Adrik sat back down on the couch, but sat closer to me so I wouldn't have to move from Andrei. The officer glanced at Andrei and at Adrik, then back to me. "I'm Jason," he said. He looked at the uniformed officer. "That's Ryan. And that's Will," he said pointing to the guy with the sketch pad. "We're really grateful to have found you, you know. You seem to be the only one that can remember what this guy looks like. Can you tell us what happened?"

I looked up at Andrei, who gave my shoulders one last squeeze before I moved so I was sitting between him and Adrik. I had my hands pulled inside my sleeves so the officers couldn't see my bruised knuckles. I didn't need them asking questions about anything else today. Adrik stretched his arm across my lap as I started to recount the story of my uncle and what had happened the night he took me to this doctor.

I gave the sketch artist, Will, as complete a description as I could of what the doctor looked like. He would ask me questions as I described the guy, trying to get a better idea of what he looked like. He was working on his sketch pad the entire time we were talking. Finally, he said, "okay, tell me if this looks like him. We can change anything that might be off." He turned his sketch pad and I saw the face of the doctor that had taken my uterus. I stared at it for a moment, then felt like I was going to vomit. 1 jumped off the couch, racing to the bathroom, which was across the floor from Adrik's office, not wanting to use his private bathroom to spare everyone from having to listen to me vomit.

I wasn't going to make it. Thankfully, everyone had gone home for the day and I spotted a trash can. I grabbed it and emptied what was left of the burrito I had for lunch that day Into the can. I felt Adrik's warm hands on my back. I was still bent over, not sure if I was going to vomit again or not. I groaned. I hated vomiting and I hated it worse when it happened in front of people. He didn't say anything, he just gently rubbed my back until I stood up. When I did, he ushered me toward the bathroom. When he came into the bathroom with me, I couldn't help myself. I looked at him, saying, "under any other circumstances, this would be kinda hot."

He smirked at me. "I'll remember that," he said as I turned on the water in the sink. I washed my hands then splashed water over my face. He handed me a paper towel when I was done. I glanced at myself in the mirror. I could plainly see the Bar on my face. I knew everyone else would be able to as well, I caught sight of my hands as I was drying my face, I quickly pulled my sleeves back over my hands to hide them. Adrik noticed. I just looked at him and said, "I should've worn gloves and told the was a germophobe or something

"It will be fine, solnishko. Don't worry," he said as he pulled me to him.

When we walked out of the bathroom, all five of the guys were lined up outside the office, waiting to make sure I was fine. I couldn't help but smile to myself. "They worry almost as much as you do," I said.

He clicked his tongue. "More, I think. Which is saying a lot."

Chapter Two Hundred Two

Sephie

I smiled at them as we walked closer, watching them relax knowing I was okay. “Hope you guys didn’t want burritos again anytime soon. It’s going to be a while before I’m okay with that idea,” I said as we walked back into the office.

This time, Adrik sat on the couch and I sat in between his legs, his arms wrapped around me. Jason looked sympathetic when he said, “I hate vomiting. Hate it worse than anything in the world. But I’m guessing by that reaction, we nailed what he looks like?”

I nodded my head. “That’s him. He’s probably older now, though. It was 8 years ago when it happened.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Will said. “We’ve got software that can digitally age a person. We’ll make a few variations of how he might be aging to see if people recognize him.”

Jason looked at me, a serious look on his face. “Sephie, where is your uncle now? You know you can press charges against him. right?”

I froze. I felt Adrik hold me tighter. Jason noticed, adding, “you said he used to beat you. He needs to be brought to justice, Sephie. He shouldn’t get away with that.”

“He didn’t,” I said, matter-of-factly. Jason looked at me, somewhat confused. “He’s dead. I killed him,” I said as I stood up. I lifted my shirt over my head, turning my back to them. “I had to, or he would’ve killed me.”

I heard all three of them curse as they looked at my back. Ryan, who hadn’t said a word the entire time, finally quietly said, “charges brought.”

I couldn’t help but laugh quietly as I pulled my shirt back on, careful to keep my hands covered. I turned and sat back in Adrik’s lap, his arms once again holding me tightly. Jason, who was still somewhat speechless, was trying to find words. Ivan spoke up, asking “the commissioner said you would share the information you had on this doctor?”

Jason was once again snapped back to reality. He looked to Ivan, nodding his head. “We brought a few boxes with us, but there’s more at the station. Ten years’ worth of information on this guy, to be exact. You can look through all of it. The commissioner made it clear we were to cooperate fully with you guys.” He looked at Adrik, leaning forward in his chair. “Look, I know you guys can operate outside the law, where we can’t. I don’t care anymore. I want to see this guy in jail, but if he ends up dead, I won’t shed a tear over it.”

Will said, “there are countless other stories, just like yours and some that are worse. He has to be stopped.”

Adrik simply nodded. Ivan stood up and asked to make a copy of the sketch so he could get it out to his people right away. Will readily handed it over. “We’ll send the aged version to you, as soon as we have it. I’ll get this to the IT department as soon as we get back. They’ll age him and we can send over that one.”

They were getting ready to leave. Adrik looked to Andrei, and said in Russian, “hold onto her until they’re gone.” Andrei nodded once, reached over, and pulled me to him again. I curled up against his side, with his giant arm over me protectively. Adrik stood up, as well as Misha, Stephen, and Viktor. Those three stood In front of me while Adrik talked to the officers.

Andrei looked down at me, somewhat curious. “Why are you so worried, spider monkey?” he asked me quietly, still speaking Russian. Misha, who was close enough to hear the question, glanced down at us, curious as well.

I pulled my hand out of any shirt sleeve far enough that he could see my bruised knuckles, quickly pulling my hand back inakde. Recognition spread over his face. “No unnecessary questions,” I said, quietly. Viktor and Stephen escorted the officers back

downstairs. Misha turned to me and said, “you were born for this shit, gazelle.”

1

While Adrik’s schedule had mostly been clear, the morning filled up quickly with a few meetings. Ivan and Viktor also needed time to get the doctor’s picture out to their people. Will had sent over the aged version of the doctor the previous evening, as promised. They gave both versions to their people, hoping that someone would recognize him.

Misha and Andrei were with me. We stopped by Adrik’s office on our way back from the gym, just because I had a feeling his schedule had changed yet again. Not long after we walked into his office, Andy walked in. He nodded to Andrei and Misha, then walked to Adrik, his hand extended. As he went to sit down across from Adrik’s desk, he noticed the picture of the doctor that Ivan had left on the coffee table. Instead of sitting, he walked to it, picking it up. He looked at it, then looked to Adrik, confused.

“Why do you have Dr. Moretti’s picture?” he asked.

We all stood at the same time. “What did you just say?” Adrik asked. He was trying to remain calm, but only barely keeping it together. I glanced to Andrei, who quickly pulled his phone out. He called a number, let it ring, then hung up. Within seconds, Viktor, Stephen, and Ivan were in the office as well. Andy didn’t even have time to respond to Adrik’s question before they were there.

“Dr. Moretti’s picture. Why do you have it?” Andy asked again.

Ivan, who wasn’t even trying to control his anger, walked up to Andy. He towered over him. “How do you know him?” Ivan asked, his voice heavy with anger.

Andy, who was now completely terrified, sat down. He didn’t respond right away, like he was trying to figure out how best to proceed. I looked at the guys, who all looked ready to kill something, then looked at Andy, who was pretty sure he was the thing about to be killed. I walked quietly to the door of the office, closed it, then walked toward Andy. The guys were aware of my movements, but hadn’t taken their eyes off Andy. Andy, however, was watching me. I put my hand on Ivan’s arm, which caused him to look at me. I pushed him to the side, gently, so I could stand in front of Andy. Once Ivan moved, I leaned against, Adrik’s desk, trying to be less threatening toward Andy,

“Andy, this man took something from me. Something important. Something I’ll never be able to get back. How do you know who he is?” I said, trying to remain as calm as possible, even though I could feel my anger just below the surface. I could also feel Adrik’s anger getting stronger, the longer it took Andy to answer his question.

Andy looked at me, still wide-eyed. I could see him struggling, trying to find the right thing to say. He finally took a deep breath. “Fuck it. I’m already a dead man if Sal ever finds me. Not like he can kill me twice.” I glanced up at all the guys, who were still standing, ready to pummel something. I gave them all a tight smile and made a motion for them to sit. They begrudgingly took a step back and sat down.

I looked to Andy again, trying to smile as genuinely as possible at him. “What does that mean, Andy?”

Chapter Two Hundred Three

Sephie

“This is the guy that originally created brawn. He works for Sal.” I didn’t need to see him. I knew Adrik was about to explode behind me. I put my hand up, trying to at least buy me another minute to find out more. I heard him exhale, but his fist still made contact with his desk. Andy flinched.

“How much do you know about this doctor?” I asked. “In case you couldn’t tell, this is very important, so it’s worth your while to tell us everything.”

Andy took another deep breath, glancing around the room. He had the look of a cornered animal. One that knows it’s caught and is about to give in. He continued, “I’m not sure how Sal found this guy, but he’s been paying him for years. He does back- room abortions for Sal’s prostitutes mostly, but since Anthony got into human trafficking, he’s branched out into, um, other stuff.” He glanced at me, still nervous.

“Organ harvesting.” I said, flatly.

Andy’s eyes went wide. He nodded. “It’s huge on the black market, especially overseas.”

“And you said he’s the one that created brawn? How do you know that?” I asked.

“Years ago, Sal’s dealers weren’t making him the kind of money he wanted. Sales had dropped off in his area and he didn’t like it. He was on the phone with Lorenzo when Dr. Moretti walked into his office. Sal kept talking, telling Lorenzo about the dip in sales. Dr. Moretti suggested they formulate a new drug. A designer drug, I think he called it. He said, ‘people like new things, right? Give them something new and sales go back up.’ Sal liked the idea and paid Dr. Moretti to formulate it. He experimented for a few weeks and came up with brawn. The first edition was really popular. While aggression was a definite side effect, it got the users high as fu ck, basically.”

“They didn’t realize the dangers until later, did they?” I asked.

He shook his head no. “No, it took almost a year before they realized that continued use was killing people. The dealers are the ones that first noticed it. Other areas of the city had already stopped selling it. The dealers are the ones that stopped it, not the bosses. They said they weren’t going to ki ll their customer base. Sal’s dealers were the only ones selling it at the last, but they eventually stopped too.”

“Is this doctor the same one that came up with this new formulation of it as well?” I glanced at the guys again, who were still visibly tense. Adrik had started pacing back and forth behind me, trying to remain calm. I wanted to go to him, but I also didn’t think Andy would keep talking if I wasn’t close to him. He knew I was standing in the way of the guys.

“I think so, although I can’t be sure. I know Sal still pays him,” he said, watching Adrik pace behind me.

“Do you know how to find him?” I asked.

He thought for a moment. “Yeah, unless he’s moved. Sal lets him use one of his houses just outside the city. He used to be a doctor at one of the hospitals in the city, but he had his license revoked after too many medical misconduct cases. When he was still working at the hospital, Sal would pay him under the table only when he needed him. Once he had his license revoked, Sal put him on the payroll and he started roving clinics around the city. People would come to him for various things, pay cash, and he’d do whatever, no questions asked, as long as the cash was flowing. When he created brawn, he initially made Sal a lot of money, so fal let him have that house as thanks.”

“We’re gonna need to know where that house is,” I said.

“Yeah, of course. I don’t know if things have changed now or not, but he never has security with him. Sal always offered, but he said he didn’t need it because no one could remember his face that he worked on. He said he would see people all the time that he worked on. He would purposely go and talk to them because there was always the faintest hint of recognition there, but they could never place him. He liked to mess with their heads.” Andy said.

I felt like I almost had the wind knocked out of me listening to Andy speak. “What the actual fu ck,” I said, louder than I meant to. Adrik stopped his pacing, as well. We all just stared at Andy for a moment, completely du mbfounded at how evil this man really was.

I suddenly had a thought. I looked at the guys and turned to look at Adrik, saying in Russian, “we need to make sure the police don’t release his picture. He’s going to run if it gets out that we know what he looks like. Sal will get him out of the city.”

Ivan nodded. He got up and walked out of the office, his fingers dialing a number on his phone as he walked out. Andy had a renewed sense of worry on his face, since he couldn’t understand what just happened. “Don’t worry, Andy. Your life is safe,” I said. I couldn’t muster a smile, but I tried to say it softly enough that he wouldn’t hear my anger.

We were silent for a moment as we waited for Ivan to come back into the office. If the police had already released his picture, we would have to move quickly. If they hadn’t, we had a little more time. If Dr. Moretti believed he was anonymous still, he would be easier to catch.

Ivan walked back into the office, somewhat relieved. He said, still in Russian, “we’re good. They haven’t released it. They’re not going to now, either. Jason asked if he and Ryan could come with us when we go get him, though.” He had a small smile on his face.

We all audibly exhaled. I looked at the guys. “Guess we’re not going to the house today, after all.” They all chuckled while Andy still looked like he was barely keeping control over his bladder. I looked at him, curious. “What did you need before this revelation, Andy?” I asked him in English.

He looked at me, a deer in the headlights look. “It’s not important. It can wait.”

Normally, I would have gotten that information out of him, but right now, I didn’t care. I nodded, standing up. I walked around Adrik’s desk. He was still standing in one spot. I could see he was fighting to keep control. His jaw was clenched, his hand in a tight fist at his side, his shoulders tense, every muscle in his body flexed. I found myself oddly turned on as I walked to him. I chewed on my bottom lip, without realizing what I was doing. He glanced at me, clearly recognizing the look on my face. It was what he needed to calm down. He smirked at me as he pulled me to him quickly. Viktor had called Andy to him, finding out the location of the house and any other details he knew about, so they weren’t necessarily paying attention to me and Adrik. I saw Adrik glance in their direction briefly, then one arm pulled me to him by my waist, the other hand on the back of my neck as his lips crashed into mine. He kissed me so passionately that I just about couldn’t breathe. He stopped, pressing his forehead to mine. His breath was heavy as well. “I needed that. I need you, solnishko,” he said, still trying to catch his breath. “To keep me from destroying everyone.”

Chapter Two Hundred Four

Sephie

Andy told the guys everything he knew, then hurriedly left the office. He looked like he didn't want to be in the office any longer than he needed to be, given the reaction we all had when he identified Dr. Moretti. The guys were in deep discussion about a plan for what to do about Dr. Moretti.

Viktor's phone rang. He answered it, a puzzled look on his face. He looked at me, now on the couch in Adrik's lap to try to help him remain calm. He ended the call, saying, "someone is here to see you, sestrichka. They're in the lobby."

I looked at him, completely confused. "Who is it? Nobody comes to see me." I felt Adrik's arms tighten around me.

"He said it was a guy, Tall, blonde hair. He said he knows you." Viktor said.

"It has to be Max. He's the only guy, outside of this room, that would know me and know where to find me. Although I don't know why he would be here, unless he broke up with Tori," I said.

Misha and Andrei stood up. "We'll take you down to see him," Andrei said. This wasn't going to end well. Neither of them had any love for Max.

Adrik, who was already struggling to keep his cool, let his hatred for Max finally come out as he said, "I don't want him up here, but I won't keep you from seeing what he wants." I tried not to laugh. I turned to look at him. He saw the amused look on my face, which caused him to soften just a bit. "What? That guy is a fu cking mo ron. There. I said it."

I couldn't keep it in. I laughed. "I mean, you're not entirely wrong," I said, kissing his lips.

On the elevator down to the lobby, I pulled my hands inside my sleeves again. I sighed. "As if this week couldn't get any weirder." I leaned back against the wall of the elevator. I felt Andrei's hand pulling me off the wall so he could wrap his sizeable arm around me. I leaned against his shoulder, thankful for the comfort as I watched the numbers on the elevator descend. Right before we got to the lobby, 1 looked at them both. "Just promise me you won't ki ll him in front of everyone, because I can almost guarantee there's going to be some du mb shi t that comes out of his mo uth."

They both smirked at me. "We're not savages, spider monkey. He won't see it coming when it happens," Andrei said, his mischievous grin across his face.

As we walked off the elevator, I could see Max surrounded by three guards. He looked ho rrible. He also looked pi ssed, which surprised me. "Huh," I said as we walked closer. Misha picked up on it as well and stepped closer to me.

"Hi, Max," I said as we walked up. Andrei nodded to the guards that were standing with Max, indicating that they were free to go.

"Was that really necessary? Like I can't just come see you? Don't they know we're friends?" he asked, a clear edge to his voice that I didn't appreciate. Misha and Andrei both tensed next to me.

"Are we though, Max?" I said, my anger from earlier still right at the surface. "How many times have you fallen off the face of the earth because the latest girl you're fu cking was jealous of me, even though she had no reason to be? Is that why you're here now? You finally broke it off with Tori and you remembered that exist again?" Andrel and Misha both glanced down on me, surprised at my response, but both trying to hold in smiles.

Max was slightly stunned at my response. I crossed my arms across my chest, waiting for him to answer. He glanced at Andrel and Misha, then looked to me. "Do they have to be here?" he asked

"YES," we all said at once.

He took a small step back. "What do you want, Max?" I asked, now losing patience.

"I saw Chen the other day. He said you came to him asking questions. I just wanted to make sure you were okay," he said.

I laughed. "That's not why you're here, Max. Don't play the protective friend card when you haven't bothered to reach out since you started dating Tori, not even after I warned you about her. Now, what do you want?"

Misha glanced down at me, recognizing the look on my face. "You better get on with it, dude. She's losing patience, which means I'm gonna lose my patience, which means Andrei's gonna lose his patience and the rest of the people in the lobby aren't ready to see that happen today. Help them out by getting the fu ck on with it."

Max looked at him, wide-eyed, then looked at the floor. "You were right," he said, quietly.

My anger wouldn't let me feel sorry for him. "I'm sorry, what was that?" I asked.

He took a deep breath in, exhaling loudly. "You were right. About Tori. She's almost destroyed me. I'm going broke because of her. I can't pay my rent. She doesn't seem to understand that I need to flirt with the women at the bar to get tips and that's all it is. I might be an as shole when it comes to women, but I don't cheat."

"Have you broken up with her?" I asked.

He shook his head no. "I'm scared to. I don't know what she's going to do. She's gone completely unhinged a few times at the restaurant. Like the rest of the kitchen staff ran away because they were scared of her."

"Has the owner seen this?" I asked, trying to get him to see the solution himself.

"No. You know he rarely comes in," he said.

"He's noticed your sales have dropped at the bar though," I said. He nodded his head. "Talk to him. Tell him what's going on. He's going to side with you in this situation. You bring in more money than Tori. You're the asset, not her. Get him to come to the restaurant and then goad her into exploding. He'll see it and fire her on the spot. He's a reasonable man. Use that to your advantage."

I could see the pieces click into place in his head. He looked at me. "Sephie, you're a genius. I knew you would know how to fix this." He moved like he was going to hug me, but Andrei and Misha both stepped further in front of me, preventing him from getting closer.

Andrei looked at Max, crossing his arms across his chest. "She warned you months ago this was going to happen and you didn't listen. You chose a crazy woman over your friend. You've always chosen other women over Sephie. You're going to live with those consequences from this point forward. The next time you come here, you'll be escorted out of the building."

Max looked to me, a hurt expression on his face. "Sephie…" he said, his mo uth open in shock. He was expecting me to argue with Andrei. When I didn't, he was shocked.

I sighed. "Max, you can't keep treating me like this. I'm not going to continue to give you solutions to all your problems when I get nothing in return from you. I can't. I have too much else going on right now. If you want to be a real friend to me, one who doesn't ditch me for the latest fu ck, then we can talk. Until then, I can't keep doing this. I won't keep doing this. Andrei is right. You need to live with the consequences of your choices or you're never going to learn."

Max went from shocked to angry in a split second. It surprised me how quickly he changed. "You think you can ditch me now that you're giving it up to some rich guy? Like you're somehow better than me now?"

"You mean the same fu cking way you've ditched me over and over again? Now that the tables have turned, you don't like it so much do you? You're not going to just wait until I come back around the same way I've waited for you how many fu cking times?" I said. My anger was now fully present. "You think you can come here, interrupt my day, get the answers you need to fix the problem that I warned you about only to have you ignore it until it became a major problem and just continue to treat me like shi t and have me take it?" I had stepped between Misha and Andrei as I was talking. Max was surprised at my outburst. He'd never once seen me angry. As soon as he took a step back, it fueled my anger. I knew I had him on the run and my anger wouldn't stop. I kept walking toward him as I was talking, knowing he was scared. "You seem to forget who the fu ck I'm giving it up to, Max. You will leave this building and you will never return if you want to remain alive. You'll be lucky if I can convince him not to have you killed after he finds out about this and he will find out about this. You did this to yourself. You will live with it." I stopped, knowing Andrei and Misha were right behind me. They were both prepared to pull me off him, if necessary. Max was lucky that my hands still hurt. I wanted to punch him.

Without taking my eyes off Max, I said to Andrei and Misha, in Russian, "can you please get him out of my sight?"

"Gladly," they both said as they stepped around me, grabbing Max and pushing him roughly toward the doors to the building. I watched as they shoved him out of the building. I was trying to breathe deeply to help myself calm down, but I knew I was about to lose it. Everything from this week was about to catch up to me all at once.

Andrei and Misha walked back in, both smiling. I knew they were happy they finally got to throw him out of the building. I couldn't help but smile at their expressions. Misha wrapped his arm around my shoulders as I turned to walk back to the elevators. I managed to keep it together until the elevator doors closed. I felt the angry tears start to fall on the ride back to the office. Both Andrei and Misha noticed, looking at me concerned.

"Don't cry, gazelle. It'll be okay," Misha said, as he squeezed my shoulders.

I tried to laugh, but it came out more like a cough as I was trying to hold back the tears. "I'm not upset. I'm fu cking pi ssed. I wanted to punch him, but my hands still hurt," 1 said, pulling my hands out of my sleeves, reminding them of my bruised knuckles.

They tried to hold in their laughter, but they couldn't. I looked at the relief on their faces and couldn't help but laugh with them. I sighed. "You guys helped me finally see him for who he really is. I don't want to put up with that anymore," I said, pulling my hands back in my sleeves.

Andrei pulled me to him, wrapping his giant arms around me, holding me tightly. "I'm so proud of you, Sephie." I stayed quiet for a moment, trying to relax, trying to keep the shaking that had started from getting worse.

"You're my favorite, Bubba. Don't tell the others," I said. He chuckled. I noticed that Misha didn't argue, as the doors to the elevator opened. That's new. I slid my arm through Misha's as we walked back into the office, knowing there was something bothering him.

Chapter Two Hundred Five

Adrik

Sephie walked back into the office with Andrei and Misha, the rest of us looking at them expectantly. She walked straight to me, taking her place in my lap once again. I could tell by the look on her face that it did not go well. I wrapped my arms around her, holding her tightly, wanting to protect her from anything that could make her anything but happy. Instead of asking her for the details, I looked to Andrei and Misha for the recap of what happened.

They were both trying to hold in their laughter. Andrei spoke first. "I would just like to take a moment to state once again how happy I am that Tori is not a part of my life any longer. But the good news of this week is that Max won't be coming here ever again."

Viktor, Ivan, and Stephen all looked to Sephie, surprised. My expression matched theirs. Misha looked to me, a sly smile on his face. "It was impressive. Max was mad that he was made to wait in the lobby, so it didn't start well. It went downhill from there, basically."

"What did he want?" Ivan asked, watching Sephie's face. I could almost watch his anger envelope him as he looked at her. She was clearly upset, which meant Ivan was ready to end whatever or whomever was the cause of her being upset.

"He wanted Sephie to fix his life like always. He said Tori is destroying his life, but he wasn't smart enough to figure out how to get rid of her on his own," Andrei said. He looked to Sephie, complètely flustered, adding, "I mean, the solution was so fu cking obvious and he had no clue until you gift-wrapped it for him."

"Solution for what? Getting rid of Tori?" Viktor asked.

for asked

Misha nodded his head. "She asked him if he'd broken up with Tori yet, after he told her that he can't afford to pay his rent right now. He said no because he was afraid of her. Apparently, she'd scared the kitchen staff a few times after she'd lost it."

Ivan laughed. "I knew she had it in her."

"No joke, man. Sephie told him to get the restaurant owner to fire her and even laid out exactly how to do that. The owner has to know something is off because Max isn't pulling the numbers he normally does. He'll likely happily fire Tori once he knows what's happening." Andrei said.

*Max got all happy once she spelled it out for him like he was a fu cking child and wanted to hug her, but we stepped in front of her. I fully expected her to stop us, but she didn't. So, Andrei told him to leave and never come back. He made it clear that he'd chosen crazy over Sephie for the last time. Of course, he was bu tt-h urt. He looked to her like she was going to argue with Andrei. She didn't. She tried to be nice though, but she told him he couldn't keep treating her like this," Misha said. She pulled my arms around her tighter, folding her legs up inside mine. "He switched to angry real quick."

Sephie interrupted him. "That even surprised me. I've never seen him that angry before." Her voice was flat.

"Right? I was actually worried he was going to make a scene," Andrei said.

Misha looked to me. "You're about to get mad again, but walt until you hear how she handled it," he said. He even put his hands up like he was trying to keep me from flying off the handle already. "Max said, and I quote, 'you think you can ditch me now that you're giving it up to some rich guy?""

Misha was right, I was livid. Sephie felt it, leaning her head back against my shoulder so she could somewhat see me. She stretched up and kissed my cheek. "It's okay. I owned him. Right before I threatened his life," she said quietly.

glanced toward Ivan, Viktor, and Stephen. All three of their faces were red. They were just as

Misha continued, "this part was beautiful to watch, Boss. You would've been so proud of her. Andrei and I were still standing in front of her, partially blocking her from him. She stepped in between us and got right in his face. She turned it back on him and asked him if he meant she was ditching him how he's always ditched her. He took a step back. That was a big mistake," Misha said, starting to laugh.

"I glanced at Misha when it happened. We both knew what was coming. She started pushing him backward, still just verbally slaughtering him. We were worried we'd have to pull her off him. She told him to leave and never come back. Then she said he'd clearly forgotten just exactly who she was giving it up to and that he'd be lucky if she could convince Boss not to have him. killed after he finds out," Andrei said.

"And he will find out, she added," Misha was still laughing, unable to hold it back any longer. "You should've seen his face," he said. He could barely get the words out he was laughing so hard.

"She told him he did this to himself and that he was going to live with it. Then she asked me and Misha to get him out of her sight," Andrei said, now also laughing along with Misha. "I've never been so happy to throw someone out of this building."

I found myself feeling incredibly proud of her. Not just for owning Max and not taking his shi t, but for finally starting to see her worth. It meant she was starting to see in herself what I'd always seen in her. I felt my heart swell as I knew that her confidence was growing.

Ivan got control of himself after laughing with Andrei and Misha, saying, "yep. We woke the beast, but she's in complete control of the beast now." He looked at Sephie, clearly proud of her.

"It's because of you guys. You've all shown me what love and loyalty really are. What I had with Max doesn't come close. I don't want people around me that are only going to take from me," she said, quietly, her hands fidgeting with mine. She took a deep breath, then added, "he's just lucky my hands still hurt. I wanted to punch him." I could hear the smile in her voice.

"I'm sorry you had to deal with him, especially this week, solnishko. But I can't say I'm sad he won't be around anymore," I

said.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Not like he was around that much to begin with, really. But he won't be around again. Not unless

he has a death wish."

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Chapter 206

Chapter Two Hundred Six

Adrik

Sephie and I were alone in the penthouse that afternoon. She had her hands soaking in a bowl of very hot Epsom salt water to try and help the bruising calm down. She was staring at her hands as they soaked. Her expression was somewhat blank, but I knew she likely had more going on in her head than what I could see on the surface. I found myself just watching her, my own thoughts drifting in and out.

I had set a timer for her soak. I was jerked back to reality as it went off. I grabbed ice from the freezer and filled another bowl with ice water, switching it out with the hot water in front of her. She looked worried about sticking her hands in the ice water. She hated it the first time we did this, too.

“Trust me, it won’t feel as cold as you think. You don’t have to leave them in very long, either,” I said, smiling at her.

She shut her eyes tightly and held her breath as she shoved her hands into the ice water. “Nope, hate it,” she said as she pulled them out quickly. She wouldn’t leave them in the ice water for longer than a few seconds the first time we soaked her hands. I think I got her to last ten seconds that time.

“You didn’t even give it a chance, love.” I couldn’t help but laugh at her, but I knew she really did hate to be cold.

“Don’t need to. Hate it.”

I grabbed a towel and walked to her side. I soaked the towel in the ice water, then took her hands and wrapped them in the towel. She sighed. “Slightly better, but still hate it,” she said as she tried to pull her hands away.

“Only for a little bit. It will help, I promise,” I said.

She scoffed. “Fine,” she said.

I took the towel off after a minute and inspected her hands. They were still swollen and her poor knuckles were not the color that knuckles should be. I looked at her, concerned. “Maybe we should’ve x-rayed your hands when you went to the hospital with Ivan. Maybe you broke something.”

“Nope. Hate that too,” she said. She grinned at me when I looked at her sternly. She pulled her hands from mine, making a fist with each one. “I can still make a fist. I can still move all my fingers the way I’m supposed to. It just hurts when I do,” she said, showing me she could still use her hands normally.

“We’ll do this again later, then,” I said, kissing her forehead.

She looked at me, complete surprise on her face. “You’re not going to argue? Or threaten to call the doctor?

I know she saw the pain flash across my face when I thought about everything she’d been through with doctors, now that I knew the whole story. I wasn’t about to make her go to a doctor unless it was life or death, ever again. “You’ve had enough of doctors this week, solnishko,” I said, grabbing the bowl of ice water to empty it in the sink.

She watched me walk away, not knowing what to say. She got up and followed me to the sink, hopping up on the counter next to me while I washed the bowl that had the salt in it. When I was done, I stepped between her legs. She wrapped her legs around my waist, her hands on the back of my neck in my hair. She didn’t say anything, she just looked at me for a moment, She miled softly, then wrapped her arms around me hogging me tightly. I pulled her cloner to me, relieved to have a moment

with her.

I tried to step back from her so I could go get the arnica cream for her hands. She just clung to me tighter. “Nope. Hate that too,” she said, giggling.

I couldn’t help but laugh. “You’re coming with me, then,” I said, picking her up off the counter. I walked to the bathroom in our room, setting her on the counter in between the sinks. She let go so I could get the cream once we were in the bathroom. She had a wide smile on her face. I think she enjoyed trying to be bratty just to see if it would get a reaction. She would occasionally do it with the guys too. It never worked. I don’t think she’d caught on that I loved it. Honestly, I loved everything

about her.

I stood in between her legs, holding out my hand for one of hers. She placed her bruised hand in mine. I started rubbing the cream into her knuckles, trying not to hurt her. She had been quiet since Max had come to the lobby. She seemed okay with it, but it had to be bothering her. Anytime you have to part ways with a friend you’ve had for years is difficult. Even more so when it’s in a dramatic fashion.

She watched me put the cream on one hand, then the other. I would steal glances at her periodically. Her eyes were always on me. It made me think of the first night I was in her apartment, when we were in much the same position, just with me putting cream on her neck instead of her hands. I’d like to see Anthony try to put his hands on her now. I couldn’t help but laugh at the thought. She looked at me, curious.

“I was thinking back to the first night I was in your apartment, when I set you on your kitchen counter so I could put cream on your neck. I had a thought that I’d like to see Anthony try to put his hands on you now,” I said, grinning at her.

She smiled, but she also looked troubled before she closed her eyes to mask it. She laughed, looking at me again with no trace of anything but happiness. “I might actually break my hands in his case.” She looked up at me, smiling. My phone rang in my pocket. I leaned down and kissed her gently as I pulled the phone from my pocket. It was Trino. I put him on speaker so Sephie could hear as well.

“Trino, what’s up, my friend?” I said.

“lefe, I’m sorry to bother you, but I want to check on something and make sure everything is good. I don’t know who we can trust and who we can’t trust at the moment,” he said. Sephie looked at me, slightly worried.

Chapter Two Hundred Seven

Adrik

“No bother, Trino. What happened?”

“One of my top dealers said there’s a guy asking a lot of questions about brawn. He thought he was a cop at first, but then he said he confronted him about asking so many questions and he dropped your sweet angel’s name and told the dealer to check with me,” Trino said.

Sephie said, “that’s Chen, Trino. He’s asking around for me. He used to be my neighbor. I told him that any of your dealers would help him, but told him to drop my name if they gave him shi t. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Miha, it’s good to hear your voice. I don’t mind at all,” he said. Sephie smiled at me. Trino added, “you’re a smart girl, miha. That was a good move telling him to use your name. I would definitely check that. I don’t want to ever be on your bad side.” He laughed.

Sephie laughed as well. “Chen knows that your dealers are not with this plan. He’s trying to find out more info for me. Did he tell your guy what he knows?”

“No, not yet. He found out more info?” Trino asked, clearly curious

“Yeah, I was going to call you tonight, Trino. None of the dealers he’s talked to except one guy that works for Sal knows anything. Sal’s guy said they’re getting a head’s up before they switch the shipment. The dealers in his area of the city are supposed to lay low that weekend and not sell. Sal is trying to keep his area quiet that weekend to gain favor back from his people,” I said.

We could hear Trino cursing in Spanish. “No shi t? Did he know when it’s happening?”

“No shi t. He didn’t know, but that guy thinks Chen is in on the plan already, so we’re hoping he gives Chen a head’s up. Chen is trying to find the right person in your network to pass the info to,” I said.

“And you found this guy through Sephie?” Trino asked.

“Yeah, I used to live in the same building as him. I saved him from marrying a wh ore, basically, so he owes me,” she said. Her eyes went wide and she shook her head like she couldn’t believe she just said that out loud.

“Miha, I know Jefe is right there, but I love you. Come to Colombia, mi amor,” he said, still laughing.

“I’ll come to Colombia, but only to find you the perfect woman who already loves Colombian men. I seem to have a thing for Russians,” she said, grinning at me.

“Deal,” he said.

“I’m guessing the dealer that Chen talked to is a good contact if he does get a head’s up?” I asked, trying to steer the conversation away from talk about Trino and Sephie together. While I knew I had nothing to worry about, it still didn’t mean I wanted to think about that happening.

“Yeah, he’s one of my top guys. I talk to him regularly. He can get the word out to all my guys quickly, too. Any progress on the warehouse or are you going to take my advice and go with the car bomb?” he asked.

I chuckled. “We’re still working on it, but I do like your idea, not gonna lie. I’m beginning to enjoy your dramatic flale, Trina I

smiled at Sephie. “Speaking of, have you picked out the cliff for Massimo yet?”

“Oh, I have the perfect one, Jefe. I was considering a different one, but you’re right. It needs to be the tallest one I can find. I have the perfect spot. He’s going to be falling for a solid five minutes before he hits the ground. On fire the entire time,” he said. We could hear the slight edge of anger to his voice as he talked about Massimo.

“Can you video that? That guy has always been a di ck to me,” Sephie said.

Trino laughed. “Jefe asked the same thing. Okay, okay. You’re perfect for each other. I won’t try and steal you, miha. But please come to Colombia and help me find a woman as perfect as you.”

“Deal,” she said.

“Thanks for checking, Trino. Chen’s been helpful to us. I’d like to keep him around,” I said.

“De nada, Jefe. Thank Sephie for her brilliant idea to drop her name. You two are becoming unstoppable,” he said, seriously.

“That’s the plan, Trino. Keep me informed on your end. I’ll do the same here,” I said.

“Will do, Jefe.”

I ended the call. Sephie was still looking at me, a little surprised. “You weren’t kidding. He wants to kidnap me,” she said, smiling.

“And to think, you used to think there was no reason to kidnap you. Now everyone wants to,” I said, smirking at her.

“You are not wrong. The list of people who don’t want to kidnap me? Very short. The list of people who do want to kidnap me? Very long. Do normal people have this issue?” she asked, her eyes still wide. I couldn’t help but laugh. She smacked my arm. “This is not funny! Wait, no. It’s a little funny,” she said as she couldn’t keep her own laughter in any longer.

I leaned in and pressed my lips to hers. There were times where I felt overwhelmed with how much I loved this woman. This was one of those times. We were being completely ri diculous about a serious subject, but I found myself feeling lighter any time I laughed with her. About anything. It felt like there were no limits to how happy she could make me, regardless of what was

going on.

Just as I deepened the kiss, my hand moving to the back of her neck, my phone rang again. I groaned against her lips as 1 looked down to see who it was this time. I looked at her, smiling up at me, her lips fuller from my kiss. I groaned again. “I need to take this, solnishko. I’m sorry,” I said, answering the phone. It was a business associate I’d been waiting to hear from.

I stayed in front of her, one hand on her thigh, as I had the conversation. She reached up and started to run her fingers lightly over my neck, down my chest where my shirt was unbuttoned. She was making it hard to concentrate. She reached up and kissed my neck lightly, letting her teeth graze my neck just barely. I cleared my throat to keep from making a different noise. She leaned back, a devilish grin on her face. I looked at her sternly as I was talking. Her fingers continued to run lightly over my neck and chest. I had to catch her hand and stop her. I had asked my associate to repeat a sentence twice already because 1 couldn’t concentrate. I heard her giggle quietly as she pushed me back so she could hop off the counter. She gave me one last kiss to my cheek as she walked out of the bathroom.

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Chapter 208

Chapter Two Hundred Eight

Adrik

It was only slightly easier to concentrate after she left. All I could think about was her. I don't know how I managed to get through the rest of the conversation, but I couldn't end the call fast enough. I stepped out of the bathroom, looking for her. She was curled up on the bed, smiling at me when I walked into the bedroom.

"You're a little bit evil, solnishko." I said. I unbuttoned two more buttons on my shirt, pulling it off over my head as I walked toward the bed. I couldn't get enough of the look on her face as she watched me walk toward her after I took my shirt off. She chewed on her bottom lip, her eyes filled with lust as I unbuckled my belt, then my pants, walking out of them as I continued toward her. I grabbed her ankle, pulling her to the edge of the bed, as she squealed. I pulled her up, so she was standing in front of me. "You appear to be over-dressed. Let me help you with that." I pulled her shirt over her head, then unbuttoned her pants, pushing them down her hips. I pushed her back on the bed quickly, making her squeal again, then laugh. I grabbed her legs, pulling her jeans all the way off, along with her panties. She made quick work to get rid of her bra, as well.

I stood over her for a moment, just drinking in her na ked body. She had gotten so skinny before the ball that she almost looked si ck. She'd been so hurt after the ball that it took her a long time to put the weight back on. But once she felt better and Andrei started really getting serious with her training, she'd put on muscle too. She was still soft in all the right places, but her body had changed. I found myself very fond of the changes.

I ran my hand lightly up her leg. I loved to watch her react to my touch. She never disappointed. She closed her eyes, a small smile on her lips. I could see the goosebumps rise on her skin as my hand ran over her stomach. I crawled onto the bed over her, leaning down to kiss her stomach lightly. I felt her hands softly run through my hair. I looked up at her, seeing nothing but desire on her face. My lips were on hers instantly. She responded by wrapping her legs around my waist tightly. She surprised me by grabbing my co ck and positioning me, pushing my hips toward her with her legs. She put her arms around my neck as 1 slid inside her. She couldn't help but moan each time. I loved it.

She pulled me toward her, but instead of kissing her lips, I kissed her neck as I started to move in and out. I needed to hear her. It was the best stress relief I had. She must've known because she moaned loudly right away. She put her head back against the bed, helping her to push her hips harder into me. I had flashes of the last time we had s ex on the couch. I ran my hand down her body to her thigh, pulling her leg from my waist. I h**ked my arm behind her knee, pushing it to her shoulder. She moaned approvingly. That was all it took for me to lose control. I wanted to hear her scream. She grabbed onto my shoulders as she got completely lost in the pleasure. I could feel and hear her building. I kept my unrelenting rhythm, knowing it would be amazing when I finally pushed her over the edge. I felt her nails dig into my skin and I knew she was close.

I felt her o*gasm as it happened. Her whole body responded to mine, pushing me closer to the edge. I couldn't get enough of her. I would never get tired of her. How she felt. How she sounded. How she made me feel. I was so lost in what she was making me feel that I ended up exploding into my own o*gasm as she was coming down from hers. I collapsed on top of her, apologizing.

"Why are you apologizing?" she asked. Her hands were lightly running over my back. It was one of my favorite things. I was still riding high from the o*gasm, so her touch was extra sensual right after we had s ex.

"I meant for that to last a lot longer," I said, smiling sheepishly at her.

"Don't apologize. I think you would've broken me if it lasted longer." She grinned up at me.

"Did I hurt you, solnishko?" I asked, concerned.

"No, not at all. It was really intense, though." Her fingers moved to my facial hair. I leaned down, kissing her passionately. She smiled against my lips. "You felt it too."

"I did. It was different this time. I got lost in the feeling," I said, playing with the curls around her face.

She giggled. "Welcome to my world. That's what you do to me every time."

I leaned down and kissed her once more. "I might get addicted to that."

She laughed. "You will. I definitely am," she said, her smile making my heart jump in my chest.

Sephie

Adrik was still laying on top of me when his phone interrupted us for the third time that afternoon. He seemed to be increasingly frustrated with the interruptions, but I understood. There was a lot going on. I was just happy to have a few hours alone with him right now. I needed it. I didn't realize how much I needed it.

He groaned as he got up to go check his phone that he had left in the bathroom. It was Viktor. I could tell by the way he answered the phone. He was quiet for a minute, then he told him we'd be down in half an hour. Viktor must've had news that Adrik needed to hear.

1 propped myself up on my elbows, waiting for him to come back. When he walked out of the bathroom, he cursed under his breath as he looked at me. "Don't do that," he said, a smirk on his face.

"Do what?" I asked, legitimately confused.

"Be that s**y. We only have time to shower and get dressed or have s ex again. I'm very torn about whether I want you going downstairs smelling like s ex when I know you're going to be in a room full of men." He sighed as he ran his hand through his hair. "You make life very complicated sometimes, solnishko." He looked at me, grinning when he saw I was trying not to laugh

at him.

I stood up, putting my hand on his shoulder as I stood on my toes to whisper in his ear, "you know we can combine those options, right?" I walked toward the bathroom, looking over my shoulder just in time to see him smile and run to me. He scooped me up and continued into the bathroom as I laughed at him. I definitely needed this.

Chapter Two Hundred Nine

Sephie

On the elevator ride down to his office, I could tell he felt much better. I caught him looking down at me, a curious look on his face. I raised an eyebrow, wondering what he was thinking. “You look like you feel better?” He phrased it like a question, like he wasn’t totally sure.

I nodded my head, laughing. “I was just thinking the same thing about you. I think we both needed a few hours away.” He pulled me to him, holding me tightly against him.

“I definitely did, solnishko. I don’t think you fully realize just what you do for me,” he said, kissing my forehead as I looked up at him. Before I could say anything, the doors pinged, signaling our arrival. He wrapped his arms around my waist, picking me up, as he walked off the elevator. He stopped, just outside. “Kiss me,” he said sweetly. I leaned down and pressed my lips to his, still feeling the euphoria from our break time activities.

“I love you, A…” I said, quietly. I started to say his name, but I forgot to check to see who was around first. He set me down, smiling down at me. I glanced around quickly, relieved no one was around.

“I love you, solnishko,” he said, grabbing my hand, lacing his fingers through mine.

All the guys were in his office when we walked in. Ivan said, “Armando should be here shortly.”

“Uh oh, is it serious?” I asked.

Ivan smiled at me. “Depends on your definition of serious, princess.”

“Sarcastic answer equals not that serious,” I said, winking at him.

Armando and Giana walked in the office, followed by Chris and Keith. Her arm was through his. I was surprised to see her. She was usually shy about coming to Adrik’s office. I was glad to see her finally gaining some confidence. She looked relieved to see me. I smiled at her, greeting her in my broken Italian. She smiled at me, answering in Italian as well.

Misha, who knew that he could make her all hot and bothered without much effort, looked to me and said in Russian, “I don’t like this, gazelle. You’re only allowed to speak foreign languages to us. Otherwise, you could be talking about how adorable I am and I wouldn’t know it.”

I laughed, making Glana nervous, I told her, again in my broken Italian, that Misha was jealous. Her cheeks flushed, but she smiled as Armando wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her to one of the chairs by Adrik’s desk,

I walked by Misha, on my way to my usual spot on the cabinets behind Adrik’s desk. I said quietly, “don’t scare her.” I tried to look at him sternly, but failed miserably. I caught myself wondering how his mother ever disciplined him as a child. He must’ve gotten away with murder because he was so adorable. It was physically impossible to be mad at that face.

I walked around Adrik’s desk, but he caught my arm as I walked by, pulling me to him. He pushed his chair back and pulled me into his Jap, so I was leaned back against him. He put his lips close to my ear and said, “I still need you close, solnishko.” I felt the goosebumps rise over my whole body. I pulled his arms around me, secretly happy when he slid his hand under my shirt.

“What have you found?” Adrik asked.

Viktor and Ivan proceeded to tell us, mostly Armando who had been kept in the dark, what we knew about the warehouse so far. They’d been unable to get into any surrounding warehouses, as those were all owned by one of Sal’s companies. There

would be no legitimate reason for someone outside of Sal’s network to be moving into one of those warehouses.

“We’ve got guys trying to run surveillance, but it’s difficult. Sal has people everywhere around that warehouse,” Ivan said. He was clearly frustrated with the situation. “From what we can tell so far, it’s going to be next to impossible to get into the building. It’s going to be difficult to get access to the outside of the building without drawing attention.”

I leaned my head back and whispered to Adrik, “Trino’s idea might be the way to go. Nothing wrong with dramatic flair occasionally.” He laughed, catching everyone else by surprise. They all looked to us, but Adrik said nothing, so I also kept my mo uth shu t. Once everyone’s attention was elsewhere once again, he kissed my cheek, smiling at me.

“Do we have any idea of when this is happening, yet?” Armando asked.

Viktor shook his head no. “Not yet, but Sephie’s friend has a way to give us a head’s up potentially.”

“We haven’t heard from him in a couple of days,” Ivan said, looking somewhat worried.

“No, it’s okay. Trino called earlier. Chen’s alive. He dropped my name to Trino’s guy and told him to check it, so he did. Trino called right away. Chen found one of his top guys, so he can get the word out quickly,” I said. Ivan looked relieved. “From what Andy said earlier, if the dealers know what’s going on, they’re not going to go along with the plan. They’re the ones that stopped it before.”

Armando looked to me, puzzled. Adrik said, “Sal has been behind brawn from the beginning. He’s the one that paid to have it created, he’s the one that distributed it originally. The dealers are the ones that stopped selling it because it was killing too many people. The other story was a lie.”

“How do you know this?” Armando asked, clearly surprised.

“We found the doctor that created it,” Viktor said. He paused, then added, “we found him for other reasons, but Andy recognized him and told us everything.”

“Do I want to know the other reasons?” Armando asked.

“No,” we all said in unison. Armando simply nodded his head, crossing his leg as he shifted positions in his chair. He glanced at Giana, who seemed less nervous than usual. He reached over and grabbed her hand, his thumb lightly rubbing the back of her hand.

I suddenly had a thought, about the doctor and the warehouse. I looked to Misha, who had that faraway look in his eye that meant he was thinking about possibilities too. I said, in Russian, we need to grab the doctor and take care of the warehouse at the same time.”

As soon as I said it, Misha looked to me, grinning. “How do you do that, gazelle? I was just about to say that, I have a bad feeling about grabbing the doctor too far ahead of taking care of the warehouse. Sal is going to know it’s us on both, but if we do them at the same time, he won’t be able to strike back as quickly.” He then said in English, See? You were made for this sh it. His broad smile stretched across his face, giving him an extra dose of boyish charm.

I couldn’t help but grin at him. I glanced at the other guys, who were in agreement. I happened to glance at Giana, who was trying to not stare at Misha, I couldn’t help but smile. Yep, he got away with murder as a kid.

Chapter Two Hundred Ten

Sephie

We continued talking for another hour or so, running through possibilities on how to handle the situation. We went through every what if scenario we could think of for what would happen if the shipment did get out. We were going to have to trust that the dealers wouldn't sell it if they were successful in getting the shipments switched.

"Of course, that brings up another problem," I said, as we were discussing their success at switching the shipments. They all looked to me, waiting for me to elaborate. "Withdrawals," I said.

The guys caught on quickly, but Armando and Giana were still confused. "What do you mean?" Giana asked.

"When you're a regular drug user, your body needs that drug to function. When you don't give it that drug, your body revolts and makes it painful until you give it that drug. Depending on the drug you've been using, the withdrawals can be, well, dramatic," I said.

"How do you know so much about this?" she asked, her tone had a hint of accusation behind it.

Adrik caught it. I felt him tense. Before I could answer, Ivan said, "everyone knows this." His tone was harsh, but it was exactly what was needed to end that conversation. He continued, "so, we're going to need to give the police and the hospitals a head's up as well, should they be successful with switching the shipments. That's going to create its own chaos in the city." He rubbed his face with his hands. "Fuck," he said. "It might be worth having a conversation with a few doctors to find out what's needed to be able to handle that scenario."

"I know a guy. He should be able to keep his mouth shut," I said, winking at Ivan. I turned to look at Adrik. "But can we bring him here this time?" He smiled softly at me, nodding his head. "I'll make a call in the morning," he said. I glanced back to Ivan, who was clearly relieved.

We finally ran through all the possibilities that we could think of for the evening. It was beginning to get late, so Armando and Glana took their leave. Chris and Keith got up to go with them, but Keith asked Viktor if they could come back once Armando and Giana were safely in for the night. Viktor nodded his head. I caught the small smile that crept up one side of his face as they walked out.

"They're eager to learn," he said. "They'll be back once Armando and Giana are taken care of."

Ivan said, in Russian, just in case, "I did not like her tone." He was clearly still angry about Giana thinking my knowledge of drugs was because I was a user.

"I did not like her tone, either," Adrik said.

"It's okay. Normal people don't know these things. She's likely led a very sheltered life up until she met Armando. It's not necessarily her fault," I said. I looked to Ivan, grinning, "but I'm very grateful you shut that conversation down as quickly as you did. I'm starting to love your demons, Super Squish." His handsome smile stretched across his face.

They're useful," he said, winking at me.

Keith and Chris walked back into the office. "What did we miss?" Chris asked.

"Oh, we changed subjects and we're talking about demons now," Stephen said, completely straight-faced. While it wasn't a lie, his delivery made it seem like he was joking. Chris and Keith just stared at him, not knowing how to respond.

I couldn't help but laugh. Once I started laughing, I couldn't stop, which made all the guys laugh as well. I wiped the tears from my eyes, saying, "Yoden for the win, ladies and gentlemen." A few more laughs made it out before I finally gained my composure. "Ah, shit. I don't know why that was so funny, but holy hell it was hilarious."

Stephen spoke in his usual calm and quiet manner, "we're all a bit stressed, Seph. It was needed."

Keith looked at me, his face suddenly very serious. "Sephie, is it okay if I ask you a personal question?"

The guys all straightened up, curious as to what he was going to ask. "Sure," I said.

"You've clearly been through some shit in your life. Armando and Giana don't know about that, do they?" he asked, timidly. He glanced around at the guys, making sure he wasn't overstepping his bounds.

"No, they don't know. Very few people outside this room have seen my back and I'd like to keep it that way. Why do you ask?"

"I noticed the tension it brought up when she kind of implied your knowledge of withdrawals was because you'd been a user," he said. He was trying to be careful and choose his words wisely as he spoke, as he could tell it was a sensitive subject.

"I wasn't a user. I was forced to live with one for a few years though. I have a feeling that Giana has led a sheltered, mostly privileged life. Her brain struggles to comprehend that everyone doesn't live like she does. She has her own set of problems that come with that, though. It's neither better nor worse than what I've dealt with. In her mind, her problems are just as bad as what I've had to deal with. Doesn't make her a bad person. Life will eventually find a way of opening her eyes to other possibilities. Or it won't and she'll become even more close-minded and judgmental. It could go either way, really," I said, shrugging my shoulders.

Keith was quietly contemplating my answer. Stephen looked at Keith. "You'll come to find that Sephie's assessment of people is always spot on. It's why we rely on her to tell us if we can trust someone or not," he said. His cheeks flushed slightly when Keith looked at him as he was talking.

"That's why Mike hated her," he said. I could see him putting pieces together in his mind.

"People who carefully craft a persona only want the world to see what they want the world to see. People like Sephie and to a lesser extent, me, can see past that persona and see people for who they really are. It generally angers them because they know they've been caught and their whole house of cards is in danger of crashing down," Ivan said.

"Don't sell yourself short, Super Squish," I said, grinning at him.

We spent a little while longer in the office, talking through more possibilities, Keith and Chris were full of questions that they didn't want to ask in front of Armando. I couldn't blame them for wanting to appear completely competent in front of Armando, but I had to laugh to myself. Armando was so relaxed about his security that he likely wouldn't have known the difference.

I had gotten up and pulled Adrik to one of the couches at one point so I could lay down. I was starting to get tired, but didn't want to interrupt the discussion until it was done. They continued to talk as Adrik ran his hands through my hair, my head in his lap. I found myself drifting between being awake and asleep. I would still catch parts of the conversation, here and there, but I eventually gave in and fell asleep.

Some time later, I felt Adrik gently, but urgently, shaking me to see if he could wake me up. He had a worried look on his face when I opened my eyes. I looked at him, confused. "What's wrong?" I asked, sitting up.

You were talking in your sleep, solnishko. You don't remember?" he asked, now clearly worried.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 211

Chapter Two Hundred Eleven

Sephie

“You were talking in your sleep, solnishko. You don’t remember?” he asked, now clearly worried.

I thought for a moment. “I don’t remember anything. What did I say?”

“You were pleading with the doctor, trying to convince him not to do the procedure,” he said. His face looked almost haunted.

“Shi t. I’m sorry,” I said, glancing around the room. Chris and Keith were gone, but the guys were still there.

“Why would you ever apologize for that, princess?” Ivan asked.

“Because I saw what hearing me on the plane did to all of you. You guys don’t need to carry the burden of all my trauma.” I glanced at Misha, who was clearly struggling. It suddenly hit me why he was struggling. “Especially Misha, who’s still beating himself up for teasing me about being pregnant, even though he had no idea when he said it.” His face turned red as he tried to control his emotions. He was staring at the floor, his elbows on his knees, trying to maintain control. I quietly got off the couch and leaned over his back. “Don’t make me bring back the emotional support sloth,” I said, as I draped myself over his upper body, I whispered to him, so only he could hear, “I still love you, my adorable Russian guardian. You didn’t know. I can’t be mad at you. I couldn’t be mad at that face anyway. Like it’s physically impossible you’re so adorable.”

He reached up and held onto my arms that were around his neck as he laughed. I kissed his cheek. “Promise you’ll stop beating yourself up?” He nodded. “Good. Because my hands still hurt, so I don’t want to beat you up for real over this.”

Adrik stood up from the couch, holding his hand out for me, “come, we should go soak your hands again.” He still had a look of worry on his face, but he was trying to mask it. I walked back to him, still feeling guilty for what I’d clearly just put them all through. He wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me, almost urgently, toward the door.

“Sorry for the unplanned and completely unnecessary entertainment everyone,” I said as we walked quickly out of his office. I was a little taken aback by Adrik’s behavior. Once we were on the elevator, I looked up at him. “Is everything okay?” He was silent for the short ride up to the penthouse, his jaw clenched. He still hadn’t said a word as we walked into the penthouse. I followed him to the kitchen. “Adrik?”

He finally sighed and looked at me. He looked hurt. “It’s not okay, Sephie. How long have you been struggling with these memories?”

“I mean, since it happened? What do you mean?” I asked.

“You try to carry all of this… this hurt by yourself. It’s not fair that you only share the best parts of yourself with me, but shu t me out when you’re hurting. I love you, Sephie. All of you. The best parts of you, the worst parts of you, the parts of you that like to be bratty just to get a reaction. I love all of you. You can’t keep shutting me out except when you’re happy.” he said. He was tense. He was leaning on the counter, gripping the edge of it with both hands like he was trying to crush the granite.

“I didn’t know I was talking in my sleep. I don’t remember anything. I didn’t intentionally shu t you out,” I said, quietly. I was confused by his reaction, which meant I didn’t know how to react. I just stood there, for once, not having the slightest clue on what to do. I didn’t realize that I had completely zoned out until Adrik was standing in front of me.

“You’re doing it again,” he said. His voice was softer, but there was still a look of concern In his eyes.

“Doing what?” I asked, completely confused.

“Where was your mind just then?” he asked, looking more concerned.

“I don’t know. It was blank. I told you I didn’t intentionally shu t you out, then I had no clue what to do, then you were standing in front of me,” I said. I was starting to feel anxious. I could feel myself getting more upset by the second.

He cursed under his breath. “Sephie, it’s been five minutes. You completely zoned out. I had to touch you to get you to snap out of it.”

I suddenly felt like he was mad at me, like he thought I was doing this on purpose. I took a step back from him. “I didn’t know!” I said, the tears started to fall. “I’m not doing it on purpose.” I crossed my arms across my chest, shutting my eyes to try and keep the tears from falling.

I felt his arms around me, his lips on my forehead. “Sephie, has this ever happened before? Can you remember ever losing time before?” I nodded my head. “Did it happen after that night in the basement with your uncle?” His voice was much softer now. His hands running lightly over my back, trying to comfort me. I nodded my head again. “Did it happen after the forced procedure?”

“I don’t remember. Maybe. That’s when things got really bad at my uncle’s house. I don’t remember a ton of extra details,” 1 said quietly.

“Makes sense,” he said as he pulled me further into the kitchen.

“What makes sense?” I asked. I was still completely lost. He glanced at me as he turned the hot water on, pouring Epsom salt into the bowl. His face softening completely as he looked down at me.

“You’re extra cute when you’re confused, just so you know. You get this doe-eyed look that practically makes you irresistible,” he said, his sexy smirk on his face.

“I don’t know about that, but I’m definitely confused,” I said. He walked to the other side of the island and grabbed one of the chairs and brought it back to where I was standing.

“Sit,” he said, as he grabbed the bowl and set it in front of me. He remained in front of me, his fingers playing with my curls. while I looked at my hands in the bowl of hot water. “Your brain zones out because it’s trying to protect you from reliving those memories. I’ve caught you doing it several times since Monday, but I didn’t think you were truly zoning out until just now. Your brain rarely stops, so I just assumed you were deep in thought.”

“You have?” I asked, surprised.

He nodded. “Earlier today, even. When we were soaking your hands the last time. Then when you fell asleep in my office, you started talking. You only ever talk in your sleep when something’s wrong. You started to struggle and I was worried you were back in the same nightmare loop, but you started pleading for them not to take your uterus. You were screaming at one point.”

I felt the tears falling. I kept looking at my hands. “I’m really sorry. I didn’t mean to.” I could remember being in the clinic, begging for the doctor not to do the procedure. He was completely indifferent to my pleas. He acted like he didn’t even hear me.

Chapter Two Hundred Twelve

Sephie

“Don’t apologize, Sephie. I want to be here for you. If you’re struggling with your past because you’re being forced to relive it right now, I want to be here to help you through it. You don’t have to go through it alone this time. The guys, too. They also want to help.” He lifted my chin so I would look at him. “You’re not alone anymore, Sephie.”

The tears were streaming down my face at this point. I still didn’t know what to do. He already had so much on his shoulders, they all did, that I didn’t want to bother them with what had happened in the past. I’d become accustomed to keeping my past locked up tight. When it came down to it, I was still worried he was going to look at me differently.

“I won’t look at you differently, Sephie. You’re never going to find what it is that you’re constantly searching for. Don’t get me wrong, I kinda love when you search, but it’s pointless. What you’re searching for doesn’t exist. It will never exist,” he said.

I squinted my eyes at him. “How did you do that?”

He laughed. He leaned down and kissed my lips. “You were searching, love. It was easy to guess what you were thinking.” The timer on his phone went off. He leaned down and kissed me once more, then walked to the freezer and grabbed ice. He didn’t bother trying to get me to put my hands in the ice water this time. He just soaked a towel and wrapped my hands up.

“Still hate it, for the record,” I said, trying to make myself not pull my hands away from the cold towel.

He laughed, but he wouldn’t let me take my hands away, either. He stood in front of me, his arms crossed across his chest, watching to make sure I kept them in the towel until he was satisfied. “Sephie, do you know how reliant I’m becoming on having you around?” he asked.

I shook my head no. “What do you mean?”

“You’re what’s kept me from ordering the destruction of half the city in the pursuit of destroying the other bosses.”

“Maybe that’s not a good thing. It would be over with by now that way,” I said,

“Not necessarily. I would’ve unleashed my own chaos on the city. Chaos is loud. It’s disordered. There’s always collateral damage. Usually more than necessary. You don’t want chaos in these kinds of situations. Chaos is unpredictable, too.” He unwrapped my hands from the cold towel, pulling me down from the chair. He kept my hand in his as he led me to the bathroom. “Violence, on the other hand. Violence is quiet. It’s effective. Because it’s quiet. No one sees it coming until it’s too late. You can control the collateral damage with effective violence. You can predict the outcome when you use calculated violence. Without you, there would’ve been chaos. With you, there’s going to be calculated violence. See the difference?” he asked as he grabbed my hips and lifted me onto the counter in the bathroom.

“I think so,” I said. I was still somewhat puzzled.

He started to rub the amica cream on the knuckles of one hand as he continued. “When I was younger, my anger couldn’t be controlled. I left a path of destruction wherever I went. Viktor helped me rein it in, but it’s never been truly controlled until you came into my life.” I was watching his face as he was talking. He was watching what he was doing, but he would glance at me periodically. “You don’t even realize what a savage monster you’ve tamed, without even trying.” He chuckled. “Hell, you don’t even need to see me or be near me to know that I’m about to lose control now. When you were in the ring with Mike? As soon as those words came out of his mouth, I was ready to kill him. There would’ve been no stopping me, either, and I knew it. I wanted it. I’ve gotten to that point before and it took all five guys to pull me off the guy. Ivan was still an arm down, so they had no chance. I knew that. I was basically salivating at knowing I was going to beat him to death for saying that to you. Then you turned and looked at me.” He paused, to switch hands. He stole a glance and couldn’t help but smile when he saw I was still looking at him. “That’s all It took. I was still angry, sure. But that bloodlust that has never been controllable before, it just disappears when you look at me. I have no idea how you do it, but I know that I will die trying to protect you because of it.” He looked in my eyes for a moment. A faint smile on his face as he lightly pushed a few curls back from my face. “Part of protecting you, Sephie, is helping to keep you safe from your own darkness and the demons you think live there. You’ve taught all of us how to be friends with our demons. Let me help you learn to be friends with yours.”

I couldn’t help but remember Ms. Jackson’s words from so many months ago. “You offer him something that he’s never had before. He’ll die to protect it. To protect you.

Adrik

I kept my usual battle with Sephie’s curls going as I watched her think about what I’d just told her. She would glance at me periodically, so I knew she wasn’t zoning out again. I was trying to think of the right words to say to her. I knew she kept her past locked up and she’d been forced to open it all up since meeting me.

It’s one thing when you can somewhat control when and how you tell someone about your past. It’s quite another when you’re forced to divulge information before you’re ready. Sephie hadn’t been able to control telling us about any of her past, because of circumstances outside her control. That alone can be traumatic. Then you add in having to relive her trauma and I was worried it was becoming too much for her.

She looked at me and I felt my heart skip. She still had that half-confused, doe-eyed look on her face that just made her irresistible. “Ms. Jackson told me months ago, when you first moved her to the building, that I offered you something you’d never had before, and you’d die to protect it.” She had a small smile on her face. “How did she know?”

I chuckled, brushing another curl back from her face. “She’s had me pegged since the first night I came to your apartment. She saw me get out of the vehicle and look at your apartment building. She told me she could see it plainly that I was in love with you then.” I twirled her curl around my finger, looking at her innocence. “She’s right, you know.”

I could see the smile creep across her face. “She told me you were in love with me when we got home from the grocery store that day. I didn’t fully believe her until you moved them downstairs.” Her gaze dropped to her hands. Her fingers started to fidget, first on her pants, then she moved to my shirt and the buttons as she lifted her gaze slightly. I could see that her mind was going a mile a minute. She sighed, then looked me in the eyes again. “I’m not keeping you out on purpose.” She dropped her gaze again, still fussing with the buttons on my shirt. “The stuff that’s happened to me… It’s just… It’s a rough story and I can clearly see how it affects everyone that finds out about it. It’s like having my own trauma reflected back to me. Then I feel bad and want to comfort the other person because I just traumatized them with my story. Meanwhile, my wounds just got deeper.”

I started to say something, but she stopped me. She placed her hand on my chest, looking at me again. “You’re different, though. And I didn’t realize it until just now. I don’t know how you do it, but you don’t reflect it back to me. Ivan, too.” She thought for a moment, then almost whispered, “I think my dad was right.”

“Your dad was right about what, solnishko?”

Chapter Two Hundred Thirteen

Adrik

She looked up at me, like she was considering whether she should tell me something. She finally shrugged her shoulders. “Pretty sure you already know I’m mostly crazy. Remember when I told you I talked to my dad in a dream when we were at the ranch house in Italy?” I nodded my head. “It happened again alter we got home from the hospital when Ivan almost died.”

“And what did he tell you this time?” I asked, now curious, I think she was worried I would think she was in sane, but her father helped save our lives when we were in Italy. I owed him.

“He told me that we’re soulmates, for one. That we’ve met each other and fallen in love again and again over lifetimes.” She peaked up at me, half afraid that I wasn’t going to believe her.

“No offense to your father, I still owe him one, but I feel like that’s obvious, Sephie,” I said, grinning at her.

Her gorgeous smile stretched across her face. “He also told me that the rest of us are linked in similar ways. Like there’s a reason we’re all together. Ivan, especially.” Her gaze dropped once more, like she wasn’t sure how much detail she should give

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“Linked how?” I asked, still battling with the curls around her face.

“Like with Misha. My dad said I’m helping him to hone his gift of being able to tell when something is or isn’t going to go right.”

“I completely believe that, especially after what happened at the ball and then Italy. I won’t make a serious decision without consulting him ever again. Although I’m still confused how he missed that day that you went to the piano gallery when they tried to grab you,” I said. My finger traced lightly down her face as she talked.

“I asked the same thing. He said no one saw it until it was almost too late. It was the first time my dad had to intervene, but then he said he really didn’t need to because Ivan had it covered.” She paused for a minute, then looked up at me. That was a very important day for Ivan. He took my dad’s job. He officially became my protector.” She said it quietly, like she was almost scared to say it out loud.

“What does that mean?” I asked, now even more curious.

“Just like you and I are connected over many lifetimes, so are Ivan and 1. My dad said we’ve spent many lifetimes together too.”

I thought for a minute. I could feel her eyes on me as I thought back to the first time I met Ivan. He saved me and Viktor and got us into and out of a very difficult situation safely. I remember feeling like I had known Ivan for much longer than a couple of days when I offered him a job. In contrast, I waited a few weeks minimum, usually a few months, to offer a job to the rest of the guys. Even with not knowing everything about Ivan’s past, I still felt closer to Ivan more quickly than the other guys.

“The same way you and I have spent lifetimes together? Because I can tell you right now, this lifetime doesn’t involve sharing.” I said. I couldn’t help but smirk at her as I sold it.

She laughed loudly. “Nooooo. No sharing. Not like that, you perv. I’m pretty sure Ivan has always been my protector In some way. My dad said he feels compelled to protect me. Ivan sald that was true. Even before he knew I was different, he felt compelled to protect me.”

I wrapped my arms around her, smiling at her laughter. I leaned down and kissed her lips gently. “Ok, no sharing. We’ve all seen how much closer you and (van have become since the kidnapping attempt. I think Andrel might even be a little Jealous of it sometimes, if I’m being honest. I meant to make her laugh, but instead she looked troubled.

“He is?” she asked.

I nodded my head. “He liked being your favorite in the beginning. You know Andrel and Misha are the sensitive ones. It was a confidence boost for Andrei when you got close to him before anyone else. Now that you’re close with all of them, he doesn’t feel as special anymore.”

“How do you know this? Has he talked to you about it?” she asked. She was clearly worried about it.

I couldn’t help but smile at her. “No, solnishko. It’s not a problem for him, either. I’ve just seen his face fall a few times when he thought you were coming to him and you went to one of the other guys instead.”

She looked lost in thought for a moment. I leaned on the counter so I could be eye level with her, forcing her to look at me. “They all love you, Sephie. But they also know there’s one of you and five of them. They’re big boys. They’ll manage.”

“But I don’t want to cause problems. I did get close to Bubba first. He’s just so easy to talk to and trying to help him get with Tori probably helped me get closer to him too. I don’t want him to be sad about me being close to Ivan though. Ivan and I are bonded over trauma. I’m not sure that’s something to be jealous of,” she said, chewing on her bottom lip.

I chuckled, which made her look at me again. “This isn’t something you should worry about, love. But it illustrates my point from earlier perfectly. You’re worried about making Andrei sad when you’ve had quite possibly the most stressful week since I’ve known you and your brain is trying to find creative ways to help you silently cope so you don’t feel like you’re burdening anyone else with your past. Andrei being a little jealous of your special relationship with Ivan should not be anywhere on your list of things to worry about right now.”

She looked down at her hands, which started to fidget again, as she continued to chew on her bottom lip. I put my hand under her chin, gently lifting it so she would look at me again. “Do you know why Ivan and I are different when we hear what’s happened to you, Sephie?” She shook her head no. “Because we know what real darkness is. We’ve been living in it for years. It doesn’t scare us like it does other people. I think that’s what you’re seeing reflected back to you on other people’s faces. They realize that you’ve survived something they couldn’t. That alone makes you stronger than most people you will meet in your life. That’s a scary realization for some people. They can’t handle knowing that you can walk among real monsters and survive.” 1 paused. “Not just survive. It’s clearly made you stronger, the same way it has for me as well as Ivan. I don’t know what happened to Ivan in his past, but I know it wasn’t good. He doesn’t know everything that happened to me in my past either, but it’s also not good. But we both recognize the look in each other. We’ve both seen it in you, as well. It’s the look you get when you’ve stared evil in the face. It’s why your past doesn’t scare us. We can recognize that you’re a survivor, just like us.”

She was looking at me, curiously, the way she would when we would tell her stories about our past. I took her arms and put them around my neck, pulling her to me so I could pick her up off the bathroom counter. I walked us back out to the couch, keeping her in my lap as I sat down. I continued my battle with the curls around her face as I continued. “I knew you were the

one for me that first night, when I told you my name.” I felt that pull in my chest toward her when her wide smile stretched across her face. “That was before I knew everything you’d been through. Every single new thing I learn about you makes me love you more and confirms what I’ve always thought about you. You’re the most extraordinary woman I’ve ever met and I’m eternally grateful that you’re in my life. Ms. Jackson was right when she said you give me something I’ve never had before, but it’s so much more than she knows. You’ve brought balance back to my world. You’ve reminded me of the good, not only in me. but in everyone you see.”

“Well, maybe not everyone everyone,” she said, grinning at me.

“Fair enough. Almost everyone you see,” I said. I brushed her hair back from her shoulders, leaving my hand on her neck, my thumb rubbing gently along her jawline. She leaned into my touch, closing her eyes for a moment. A single tear fell from her eye. I reached up and wiped it away with my thumb. She opened her eyes, looking at me. The tears that were threatening to fall were enough to make the colors of her eyes swirl in the low light

“I needed you to remind me that I’m good.” She closed her eyes again, causing more tears to fall,

Chapter Two Hundred Fourteen

Adrik

"Sephie…" I said, almost breathlessly. I was silent for a moment, trying to find the right words to say, but I kept my hand on her neck as she was still leaning into my hand. "That night that I compared you to a diamond and you said you would only compare yourself to a black diamond to match your soul? Remember that?" I asked. She nodded her head slightly, but didn't open her eyes. The corners of her mouth were starting to curl in a smile as she thought about it. "I told Viktor and Ivan about that part of the conversation the next morning while you were still sleeping. I believe my exact words were 'we all know she has the whitest soul of anybody ever, but it's still funny.'"

She kept her eyes closed, but she had a small smile on her lips now. She thought for a moment, then opened her eyes. "I think you can have both," she said.

"Both what?" I asked.

"Both white and black on your soul. Ivan does for sure. He saw it We probably do too," she said. She suddenly looked like she'd just solved a puzzle that had been perplexing her, but she immediately looked at me like she didn't mean to say it out loud.

I couldn't help but laugh. "You don't have to tell me, but I can't deny I'm very curious to know how that happened."

She chewed on her bottom lip, torn between wanting to tell me and not sure she should. She sighed, then whispered, "whatever. You already know." I laughed at her, which seemed to put her at ease. "When that truck hit us, I saw Ivan turn toward me. He was using his body to try and shield me, but I can clearly remember the look on his face. I could see the worry on his face when he looked at me, but then he was looking at something around me that I couldn't see. The look on his face clearly changed to one of wonderment. The truck was pushing us into the parked cars on the side of the street. When we hit those cars, I shut my eyes. I think that's when I hit my head. He was unconscious when I opened my eyes." She paused again, not sure she should continue. She started to fidget with the buttons on my shirt again, focusing on that instead of looking at me as she continued. "My dad told me what Ivan saw. When I was with Ivan in his room that day that he broke down at the house and then I broke down later, he told me what he saw, after I assured him he wasn't crazy." She was still for a moment, then looked at me. "Ivan got his wings that day. My dad said he wrapped his wings around me right before the truck hit us, but when Ivan turned toward me, that was the moment that he got his and he saw them wrap around me and even my dad's wings." She dropped her gaze, chewing on her lip, not sure how I would take what she had just told me. As she was talking, I felt goosebumps rise over my entire body.

"But… How? He's still here," I asked.

She cut her eyes to me, grinning. "We both said the same thing. I still don't fully understand it, but he's not allowed to go anywhere now. My dad said he's fully stepped into his role as my protector now that he proved he would give his life to protect me. He also said Ivan's wings are way cooler than his. They're white, but fade to black on the ends and apparently he's the big guns, so he has red on the tips too."

Ivan's statement about Sephie's ring design suddenly made perfect sense. "That's why…" I caught myself before I said anything further. I didn't want Sephie to know about that yet. She, of course, caught it.

"That's why what?" she asked.

I smiled at her. "If I tell you that, it will ruin the surprise," I said, reaching up and pulling her down to me. I pressed my lips. against hers.

She sat up, needing to search my eyes. "You don't think I'm crazy for saying all this?"

"Not even a little bit. Ivan has spent so much time in Hell, but despite everything, he still has a heart of gold when it comes to

the people he loves. It makes sense. And honestly, I couldn't think of a better protector for you. His inability to feel pain gives him a unique advantage," I said. She was running her finger lightly over my face and neck as I talked.

She looked surprised. "That's exactly what my dad said."

"He's becoming the secret weapon of my secret weapon." I smiled at her, happy to see her opening up to me and relaxed about it.

She looked at me seriously. "I don't think Ivan is the only one among us that's spent so much time in Hell that he can walk freely between Heaven and Hell. My dad told me I could too and since you're the one that pulled me out of my nightmare, I'm guessing you can too."

I sighed. "You're not wrong. When you were in your nightmare loop and my voice pulled you out of it, did you go to a dark place? Like you couldn't see anything, almost like you were swimming in darkness?"

Her eyes got wide. "You've been there too. That's how you pulled me there. That's how I pulled Ivan there."

I shut my eyes, nodding my head. I felt her fingers lightly running through my facial hair. She leaned down, her lips lightly brushed mine. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to. I did wander how you pulled me there, especially after I did it for Ivan and found out he goes to the same place."

"I was a kid the first time someone tried to get to my father through me. They ran the car we were in off the road. It killed the driver instantly and the bodyguard that was with me had severe injuries. I was small enough that I somehow survived, although I still don't know how. I heard them walk up to the car, to see if there was anyone still alive. I knew enough to play dead. They thought they had succeeded, so they left. They wanted our bodies found, thankfully. I climbed out of the car and ran for help. My father was a cold man, but I distinctly remember him picking me up when he got there. He held me all the way to the hospital. It's one of the only times I saw him worried. I passed out on the way to the hospital. I remember feeling relief that my father was there and I felt safe, so I let go. It took me three days to wake up. Those three days were the first time I remember the darkness. I was scared at first. I cried. I screamed. I fought. Nothing worked. I finally gave in and got quiet. When I did, 1 realized I could vaguely see and I could barely hear voices. I was hearing my father's voice. He never left the hospital room those three days. The man who I barely saw when I was awake wouldn't leave me when I was out. It was his voice that I followed to find my way out. His face was the first thing I saw when I opened my eyes. It was one of the few times he told me he loved me and that he was proud of me." I had opened my eyes when I started to tell the story. I'm glad I did. Sephie's expression was all I needed to see to keep going. She was always so curious. I loved her interest in anything I wanted to tell her, but I also loved that she didn't want to pry.

"See, even your father has some good in him. It might not have been very much, but it was there for those three days," she said, smiling sweetly at me. "And he taught you how to save me, so I'm grateful for that, if nothing else."

"I never knew it was a skill I would need to use. It never crossed my mind with Ivan. We've been in the hospital plenty of times with him and never once did I think about it with him."

"Because you were never meant to pull Ivan out. You're not the only one that doesn't want to share in this lifetime," she said, grinning at me.

"Sometimes you surprise me, solnishko. You constantly find new ways to make me love you even more," I said, laughing.

She looked at me, a smile still on her lips, but her eyes were serious. "Thank you. For knowing what I need before I do, for reminding me of what I needed to hear, for trusting me enough to tell me that, and for not thinking I'm crazy. Although that last one might still be up for debate," she said, laughing. She was trying not to worry, but I could tell she was legitimately worried. I held her gaze as long as she needed, letting her search for what she wasn't going to find. She finally satisfied herself, her wide smile stretching across her face once more.

"I love you, Sephie. Plis Infinity. Plus one," I said, pulling her to me

"I love you, Adrik," she said, smiling against my lips.

Chapter Two Hundred Fifteen

Adrik

I woke the next morning with Sephie laying across my chest. I ran my hand through her hair, causing her to snuggle closer to me. I loved her close to me, even more so after our long conversation last night. She never failed to make me feel like I was even more in love with her anytime we had a serious conversation, but last night was even more than usual.

She's had quite possibly the roughest week since I've known her, which is saying quite a lot. Her light was starting to dim again, but not because she was physically hurt this, time. After she gave the description of the doctor to the police, I could tell she was struggling to close the door once again on that part of her life. It might've been easier had she not had to also deal with the Mike situation and trying to close the door on that part of her life at the same time, on top of dealing with Max unexpectedly showing up.

She was dealing with more than most people would be able to handle and yet she was still concerned about Misha and Andrei. When I finally woke her up out of her nightmare last night, she almost immediately went to Misha to comfort him. I never minded her going to the guys, but my patience was short last night I knew the forced procedure had affected her, but hearing her scream and plead for it not to happen made it more real. She was devastated. We could all plainly hear the despair in her voice as she pleaded for them not to do it. I wanted to help her, to make her feel better. But not even one minute after she wakes up, she's consoling him.

That's who she is and that's one of many things I love about her, but I do find myself wishing she would be a little more selfish sometimes. Maybe I'm being selfish for wanting that, as her light is brighter after she takes care of herself. I need her light. I need her.

I inhaled deeply, pulling her close to me. She started to stir as I ran my hand lightly over her back. She lifted her head, resting her chin on my chest as she smiled at me. "Good morning," she said, sleepily. I would never tire of how sexy she looked in the mornings. Her hair was always even more out of control than usual, which gave her a wild look that made it hard to control myself. "Have you been awake long?" she asked, rubbing her eyes.

I pulled her to me and rolled us both over so she was on her back and I was on top of her. "Not long. I could watch you sleep for days anyway," I said, gently pressing my lips to hers. She smiled at me, reaching for my face. I closed my eyes as she lightly ran her fingers through my short stubble. I remembered something else Ms. Jackson had said to me that night that I had asked her to move here. I smiled thinking back to that conversation.

"What are you thinking about?" Sephie asked. I opened my eyes to find her looking at me, a curious smile on her face.

"The night I went to ask Ms. Jackson if she would move here. I asked her to keep it a secret so I could surprise you. I think she said something like 'you're in deep boy. Hope you know how to swim,"" I said, in my best impression.

Sephie laughed. "That sounds just like her. I think she even said something like that to me when she was trying to convince me you were in love with me."

I ran my fingers lightly over her face, taking in how she looked this morning. Her light was brighter. She felt better after our long conversation last night, She caught me staring at her and raised an eyebrow, still wondering what was going on in my mind. "Your light is brighter again. You feel better after our talk last night, no?"

She smiled sweetly at me, nodding her head. "I feel lighter again."

I leaned down, kissing her quickly. "Good. Now, will you make me a promise?"

"Depends on the promise?" she asked, curious.

"Promise me you'll talk to me. Or Ivan, if you're worried that I'm too busy. We will always be able to handle it, but you have to start being selfish more and taking care of you before you take care of everyone else."

Her smile faded slightly, but her eyes were still happy. "That's why you pulled me out of the office so quickly last night. Because I went to try and make Misha feel better."

I nodded. "We all heard the despair in your voice when you were sleeping, then I finally got you awake and within one minute you were trying to make him feel better. Not that I mind you making them feel better. It's not that. But you need the same, Sephie. I need you."

"I still didn't know I was talking in my sleep' last night, but I promise I will talk to you and Ivan more about what I'm dealing with." She looked at me sincerely. I squinted my eyes at her, not believing her fully yet. She smiled as she raised her pinky for me to grab. I couldn't help but grin at her as I grabbed her pinky, knowing she was serious. She leaned up and kissed my gently. "Does Ivan know what you just volunteered him for?" She had a mischievous grin on her face.

"I can't imagine he'll mind. He loves you, Sephie. Almost as much as I do," I said, smiling at her. "Besides, it's his job to protect you. In all the realms. And in all lifetimes."

I felt my heart threaten to stop as her gorgeous smile crept across her face. She giggled and wrapped her arms around my neck, pulling me down to her. "I love you, Adrik. More and more each day," she said as she pressed her lips to mine.

Chapter Two Hundred Sixteen

Sephie

Adrik stepped out of the bedroom while I finished getting dressed to make a few phone calls. He was trying to get Dr. Williams to come to his office so Ivan and I wouldn't have to go back to the hospital. We wanted to make sure that the hospitals could be prepared if we weren't able to stop Sal from switching the supply. We were trying to put in place as many fail safes as we could to make sure his plan didn't work like he wanted it to.

When I walked out of the bedroom, Ivan was in the penthouse. He and Adrik were having what looked like a serious conversation, although I couldn't hear what was being said until I got closer. They both looked at me as I walked down the hallway. Ivan smiled at me, opening both of his arms to me. I walked quickly to him. "Super Squish. I didn't know how much I really missed your regular hugs. No more one-armed hugs," I said as I wrapped my arms around his waist. He held me tightly, kissing the top of my head.

"You only have yourself to blame for that one. I kept telling you I could've given you a normal hug that whole time, but you wouldn't let me. So, really, it's entirely your fault." I heard Adrik laugh behind us.

I poked him in the ribs as I laughed too. "Where's everyone else?" I asked.

Adrik said, "I wanted a few minutes with Ivan. I told him about our conversation last night, solnishko. I also told him about your pinky swear this morning." He looked at me seriously, but I could see the concern on his face. "I'm serious about this, Sephie. I want to make sure you're always okay. Selfishly, I need you at your best. I need your light to always be this bright. I need to make sure you're always good. So, we're holding you to your pinky swear." Ivan's giant arm slid across my shoulders. He gave me a stern look, in the way that only he could. I couldn't help but laugh at him. We'd come a long way from me being convinced he wanted to murder me in my sleep.

I looked at both Ivan and Adrik. They were both so concerned about me that I couldn't help but feel loved by them both. It was still a new feeling for me. I remembered feeling loved when my mom was alive, for sure, but when I went to live with my uncle, it went to the other extreme. There was no love in that house. It was so dark in that house that it made me question whether love really did exist. Then I met Adrik and the guys. They've shown me that it does exist, that there is light in the darkness, all while telling me I've been doing the same for them. I knew both of these men would do everything in their power to make sure I was always protected, always safe, and always loved.

"I pinky swear to both of you that I will come to you more. And I love you both. That is all." I said, smiling sweetly at them. Ivan kissed the top of my head, squeezing my shoulders once more, before pushing me gently toward Adrik. He opened his arms for me, a small smile on his face.

"You do look better, solnishko. I can see when things get too heavy for you. You're obviously lighter this morning," he said as he wrapped his arms around me.

"I can see it too, princess. It's obvious when you're trying to hold things in too long. At least to us," Nan said.

"You can both tell me when I zone out, then. Because I didn't know I was doing that. I really didn't know I needed to talk about anything until we started talking about it last night. I'm very accustomed to holding everything in and not telling anyone anything So please feel free to tell me when you notice these things," I said.

"Deal," they both said.

"I know you're used to taking care of everyone else, princess. Like you were made for that role, honestly. Just let us do the same for you. Because apparently, we were made for that role," Ivan said, winking at me. I felt Adrik pull me closer.

"Super Squish, you're really getting good at these mic drop moments where I can't think of any sort of comeback, either serious

or snarky. I've got nothing here," I said, grinning at him.

We heard the door to the penthouse open as the other four guys came into the penthouse. They looked slightly wary, like they weren't sure what they would be walking into. I could see their faces immediately relax when they saw me smiling at Ivan.

"I'm sorry for putting you all through that last night. I didn't mean for any of you to have to hear that," I said.

"Don't apologize, spider monkey. We just don't know how to help. It's frustrating," Andrei said.

"Aww, Bubba. Don't get frustrated." I walked to him, as he opened his arms for me. "You guys just have to keep loving me the way you always do. That's a bigger help than you could ever imagine." I hugged him tightly, resting my head on his chest. His giant arms held me just as tightly as he rested his chin on the top of my head.

"We're always here for you, gazelle," Misha said.

"We plan on keeping you around for a very long time, Seph. Life is really boring without you," Stephen said, grinning at me. It made me so happy to see him start to really come out of his shell, I couldn't help but laugh, but I didn't want to let go of Andrei just yet. I think he figured out what I was doing, because I felt him squeeze me just a little tighter as I was laughing.

Andrei sighed, then I felt his arms relax around me. He leaned down, whispering so only I could hear, "I needed that, spider monkey. You're my favorite." He kissed my cheek, his handsome smile stretching across his face.

Viktor's phone rang. He pulled it out of his pocket, looking at the caller ID, then he looked to me. "It's Chen," he said, as he handed me the phone.

I answered it, putting it on speaker so they could all hear. "Hey Chen, what's up?"

"Sephie, my girl. I hope I'm not calling too early?" he said.

"Not at all, Chen. Did you find more info?"

"I did. I think you're going to want to hear this," he said. I glanced up at the worried faces around me. "The dealers are organizing against Sal. Word got out that they were planning on replacing the supply with brawn and, well, they're pissed."

"Organizing how?" I asked.

"They're planning on trying to stop Sal's plan, by any means necessary. They're scouring the city now, trying to find where they're making the brawn."

"How many dealers are we talking about here, Chen?"

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"All of them, Sephie. Every single dealer that has found out about this is refusing to go along with the plan. They're all still mad about the last time brawn was around. It killed a lot of people. There was a lot of tension between the dealers and the bosses during that. The bosses kept pushing it, especially Sal from what I've heard, but the dealers eventually refused to sell it anymore," he said.

Ivan said quietly, in Russian, "we can use this to our advantage." Everyone nodded In agreement.

"How organized are the dealers? Are there clear leaders we can work with?" I asked.

"Yeah, they organized quick. There's a few guys that are taking the lead. They belong to different bosses, an there's no clear loyalty to any one boss," he said.

Adrik's phone rang in his pocket. He looked at it, mouthing "Trino" as he stepped away to take the call. I looked at Ivan and Viktor, knowing what they were already thinking.

"Chen, do you think we can set up a meeting with these guys? We can work together to stop this. We've got the information they're looking for already, but we need more manpower."

"I think that's possible. One of Trino's guys, the one that I had to drop your name to, is one of the guys in charge. After he called Trino and he vouched for me, that guy has welcomed me into the inner circle, if you will. He's the one that the other dealers defer to, so I'll ask him if he's willing to work with you guys," he said.

"Ask him, please. I can already tell you the answer will be yes, but ask him. We need to set up a meeting. This could be beneficial for both parties," I said. I glanced at Misha, waiting for confirmation. He nodded his head, which made me smile.

"Okay, I'll see him tonight and I'll get back to you."

"Chen, you're the best," I said.

"Public servant, my girl," he said, laughing. "I'll call you again tonight or in the morning."

We ended the call and I handed Viktor his phone back. We waited for Adrik to come back from his call with Trino. I was assuming that Trino would've told Adrik the same information that we just got from Chen.

While we waited, I took the opportunity to check on Misha. He put his arm around my shoulders as I slid my arm around his waist. I looked up at him, as sternly as I could. "Better, my adorable Russian guardian?"

He smiled his million-dollar smile as he nodded his head. "I mean, I still feel bad about it, but less bad." I reached over and pinched his ribs hard with my free hand. He jumped. "Okay, okay! No bad. I feel no bad, I swear."

Chapter Two Hundred Seventeen

Sephic

“Good,” I said, leaning my head against his shoulder. He laughed as he hugged me tightly while we waited on Adrik. We could hear him laughing with Trino, so we knew it couldn’t be all bad news.

He walked back to us soon after. “Did Trino tell you what Chen just told us?” Viktor asked, slightly amused.

“He did. He thought he was going to tell me something I didn’t know yet. You should’ve heard the cursing when he found out I already knew. Then I told him it was through Sephie that we found out and he went on like a 5-minute rant about how he couldn’t find a woman like her in Colombia. He’s considering coming up here to see if he can find one. He said he’s getting desperate,” Adrik said, laughing.

“Just as long as he didn’t bring up his kidnapping plan again,” I said, walking to Adrik.

Ivan clearly bristled. “His what now?”

Adrik couldn’t help but laugh more, “Don’t worry, Ivan. He won’t really go through with it, but he did say he was going to actively try and steal Sephie. He’s tried to convince her to come down there in front of me, too. I think he’s lonely.” Adrik put his hands on my hips and pulled me back against him so I could still look at everyone while we talked.

Ivan cursed under his breath, which made me laugh. “Don’t worry, Super Squish. It worried me too. The list of people who’d like to kidnap me seems to be growing, rather than shrinking. I just wish I knew how to be less awesome,” I said, dramatically. I ended up making myself laugh with that one, which made everyone laugh.

“So, Trino knows the dealers are organizing and want to stop this plan as much as we do?” Viktor asked.

Adrik nodded his head. “He said one of his guys is one of the ones in charge. He’s going to tell him to meet with us. We have a much better chance of stopping this if we all work together.”

I couldn’t help but smile at the smiles on the guys’ faces as they knew I had said the same thing to Chen. “It’ll help the dealers feel loyal to you, as well. Once this is all over, you want them to want to work for you,” I said. Adrik wrapped his arms around me, holding me closer.

Misha caught my eye and grinned at me. “Made for this shi t, gazelle.”

We were in Adrik’s office that afternoon, waiting for Dr. Williams. Viktor’s phone beeped, alerting him that the good doctor was in the lobby. He stood up. “Be right back,” he said as he left the office.

He walked back in a few minutes later with Dr. Williams behind him. Adrik stood to greet him, extending his hand to him. “Dr. Williams, thank you for coming on such short notice.”

“No problem, sir. It sounded serious.” He glanced around, nervously. His eyes landed on mine and a slight smile crept across his face. Adrik motioned for him to sit as he sat at his desk. I got up from beside Andrei and moved to the cabinet behind Adrik’s desk. I smiled at the confused expression on Dr. Williams’ face when I moved. I’m not entirely sure if he had figured out which guy I technically belonged to yet. I was enjoying keeping him confused,

His confusion was short-lived as his curiosity got the better of him. “Did you talk to the police and give them a description of the doctor yet, Sephle?” He sounded hopeful when he asked, but his face fell when he saw the serious expression on my face at his question,

“Not only that, but we’ve got his name and where he’s at. He’s being watched around the clock for now,” Viktor said. I gave Viktor a small nod for answering for me.

“Really? You know who he is? Are they going to arrest him?” he asked, his hope returning once more.

“He’ll get what he deserves, doc,” Stephen said. I could see the anger on his face, which surprised me. Stephen was always so quiet, but this one seemed to really get under his skin for some reason.

Dr. Williams ran his hand through his blonde hair. “I can’t believe you found him so quickly. We’ve been looking for him for at least ten years now.”

“He does have a specific cocktail that he uses that wipes people’s memories. He tests it regularly. He likes to go up to his victims to see if they remember him. It’s why no one has been able to remember what he looks like until Sephie,” Ivan said.

“What an evil son of a bi tch,” Dr. Williams said.

“That’s not even the half of it, doc. He’s responsible for so much more,” I said.

“That’s why we had you come down here today. I’m assuming that you know all about brawn?” Adrik asked.

The disgust was clear on his face. “Unfortunately, yes,” Dr. Williams said.

“We’ve uncovered a plot to replace the entire city’s supply of drugs with brawn, except in two areas of the city. In one of those areas, they’re planning on putting a massive amount of brawn into the water supply. In the other area, they’re planning on withholding all drugs for the weekend they’re planning this.” Adrik paused to let Dr. Williams comprehend what he’d just told him. The shock was evident on his face. “We’ve got the dealers of the city working with us, so even if they’re successful in replacing the supply, the dealers won’t sell it. However, this brings up another problem.”

“Withdrawals,” Dr. Williams said.

Adrik nodded. “How possible is it for the hospitals to deal with widespread withdrawals throughout the city?”

“Do you know when this is happening?” he asked.

“Not yet, but worst case, we’ll have a few days’ notice before it happens. We’re working to stop their plan altogether. We’re just putting backup plans in place just in case,” Adrik said. “There’s the potential for a lot of people to be affected. We want to make sure they’re covered in the event we’re not able to stop it from happening.”

Dr. Williams exhaled loudly as he considered the possibilities before him. “Advance notice will make it easier for hospitals to prepare, but I’m not sure we can handle the entire addict population of the city going through withdrawals at once. Nor could we handle that same population having their drug of choice replaced by brawn, either. That’s a nasty drug, he said.

Armando and Glana walked into the office as Dr. Williams was talking. They quietly sat on one of the couches.

“Oh, they’ve changed it too. This formulation amps up the aggression, but it’s shorter lived. You know how the original brawn could make someone aggressive for a few hours before their body started to shu t down on them?” I asked. Dr. Williams nodded his head. “This new formula cuts that time down considerably, but it amps up the aggression In that shorter window.” I looked to Misha, asking, “it was what, like 20 minutes before they started to struggle to remain conscious?”

might’ve been longer. We don’t know how long in between them taking it and when they actually attacked us. But I’d say around 20 minutes is a good estimate,” Misha said, I happened to dance at Glana, who had a slight look of disgust on her face at this conversation. That’s odd.

“You were attacked?” Dr. Williams asked, looking between me and Misha.

We both nodded. “It was a test run of this formulation. They gave a couple of homeless guys the drug and then sent them to attack me and Sephie when we were out for a run,” Misha said.

Dr. Williams looked back to me. “But you’ve had experience with the old formula, too?”

I nodded, looking to the floor. Adrik turned his chair toward me, opening his arm for me. I sighed, getting up and moving to his lap. “My uncle,” I said as I sat down.

Dr. Williams held up his hand. “That’s all I need to hear, because that is clearly not a fond memory. It’s valuable information, in the event that people get a hold of this new formula. I still remember when the original formula hit the streets. We were scrambling for quite a while until we figured out how to care for the people on it.”

“What kind of support do the hospitals need? In either scenario. If they get their hands on the new formula or if they have to suffer withdrawals,” Ivan asked.

Dr. Williams thought for a moment. “Honestly, neither situation is going to be easy. Not if we’re talking about the entire city’s addict population. And I can only answer for my hospital. Other hospitals might not be as well-staffed as mine. I can, however, go back and try to come up with a plan of action for both scenarios. I’m afraid it’s going to take all hands-on deck to deal with either scenario.”

“What about their plan to put it in the water supply? What’s going to happen to children who drink water that’s been laced with brawn?” Armando asked. He was clearly worried about the people in his area of the city. I glanced at Giana again, who caught me looking at her. She immediately looked down when she caught my eye. I decided to stop looking at her for the rest of this little meeting.

Chapter Two Hundred Eighteen

Sephie

“I don’t know for sure, but I can tell you that it won’t be good. It’s so easy to overdose on the old formula, and from what Sephie has said about the new formula, it will likely be even easier to overdose on this formula. That’s really bad news for children,” Dr. Williams said.

We sat in silence for a moment. Adrik wrapped his arms around me tighter. I knew he could feel the faint shaking in my legs. Dr. Williams looked at Adrik again, his curiosity piqued again. “Does the doctor factor into this as well?”

I felt Adrik nod his head as I nodded mine. “He’s the one that created brawn originally. He’s also believed to be the one that made this new formula,” Adrik said.

Dr. Williams slumped down in his chair, like the wind had been knocked out of him. He was silent for a moment before he looked up at me, a serious look in his eye. “I feel like I should thank you once more for what you did in the emergency room that day. You had every reason to ha te me and my nurses, but you’re the reason nobody got seriously hurt that day.”

“Oh, she’s the reason you’re not dead, doc. Ivan would’ve killed you,” Stephen said, completely straight-faced. His delivery was always so serious that it almost made me laugh. I think, like Ivan, he enjoyed the shock value. I caught his eye, winking at him, trying not to laugh. He waited until the doctor was no longer looking at him, then he grinned at me, winking back.

Dr. Williams looked back to me. “I still have no idea what kind of special powers you have over that man, but I remain in awe of them. And I’m forever grateful for what you did that day, especially knowing the evil you’ve had to endure with that doctor,” he said, sincerely. I simply smiled at him, nodding once. I glanced at Ivan, who grinned at me.

“How long do you need to figure out some sort of plan and have an idea of what you’ll need to handle the fallout if we can’t stop the plan?” Viktor asked.

“I should know within a day or two. I’m going to need to have some serious discussions with the doctors, nurses, and administration of the hospital. We can get an idea of what we’ll be able to handle and can apply that to the other hospitals in the city,” Dr. Williams said.

“It’s best if this is kept as quiet as possible, doc,” Ivan said.

“Understood,” Dr. Williams said. “I’ll be vague with details. I might be able to pass it off as a training exercise.”

Viktor stood up, signaling to the doctor that it was time to go. He stood up as well, walking the few steps toward Adrik’s desk to shake his hand once more. I stood up so Adrik could also stand. Dr. Williams shook Adrik’s hand, then extended his hand to me. “Thank you again, Sephie,” he said, a very sincere look in his eye.

I kept a hold of his hand for a moment, saying, “thank you for giving us both a good experience with doctors.” He smiled at me, squeezing my hand before letting go.

While Viktor escorted him out, Adrik pulled me toward one of the couches. Armando and Giana were talking quietly. She got up quickly and left the office. We all looked at Armando, curious as to what just happened. He looked somewhat flustered, but tried to cover for her. “She said she’s feeling ill, so she wanted to go back downstairs.”

Ivan said, “embarrassment will do that.”

Everyone looked to Ivan, expecting an explanation as Viktor returned to the office. Ivan had a smirk on his face. “Glana left here last night convinced Sephie knew about withdrawals because she was a user. She found out today that wasn’t the case and now she’s embarrassed about it, but she’s not mature enough to own up to her mistake yet, so she ran instead.”

Armando looked at Ivan. “You’ve been hanging around Sephie, haven’t you? How did you know that?”

Ivan just shrugged his shoulders. Adrik pulled me closer as I smiled at Ivan. “Ivan has a very special set of skills,” I said.

Armando said, “Sephie, I want to apologize on behalf of Giana. We argued for several hours last night. She was convinced that you’d been on drugs because you have so much knowledge about them.”

“And if she was? What then? Does that mean Giana gets a license to be a b itch to her? It changes nothing about who Sephie is today if she was or wasn’t,” Misha said. He was clearly angry.

“I said the same thing to her, Misha. I don’t know where any of it was coming from,” Armando said.

Ivan caught my eye. I could tell he was making sure I was okay before he spoke. I nodded once. He said, “I do. She’s still so insecure with herself that this is her way to tear Sephie down to make herself feel better. You need to be careful with her, Mando, She’ll eventually do the same to you, if you don’t stop it. She wouldn’t have lasted five minutes in Sephie’s life over the last few years. She doesn’t know what happened, but on some level, she knows Sephie is stronger than she could ever be and instead of letting it inspire her to be better herself, she lets it make her more insecure about herself. She’ll drag you down to her level if you don’t demand she rise to yours or get lost.”

Armando looked between me and Ivan, thoughtfully. “How did you two get to be so wise?” he asked.

“Trauma is a he ll of a teacher, Mando,” I said. “Ivan is right though. You’re either going to pull her up or she’s going to pull you down.”

We heard Misha curse in Russian under his breath, still angry at Giana. Armando couldn’t help but chuckle. “I don’t have a clue what you just said, Misha, but I can guarantee I likely said the same thing last night. Repeatedly.”

Adrik kissed my cheek, brushing his cheek against mine lightly. I squeezed his arms around me tighter.

“With all due respect, Mando, you need to handle this before we do,” Stephen said. I looked back at him, surprised to see him just as angry as Misha. It was that moment that I realized just how much they all loved me in their own ways. They were so angry because a girl was bitchy to me that they were ready to kick her out for good. I smiled to myself at how cute they all were in this moment.

I took a deep breath. “She’s probably grown up privileged and somewhat sheltered. Now that she’s been thrown into the real world, she has no real coping mechanisms. She can only come from her place of understanding, which is made from her life experiences.”

Armando nodded his head. “She’s from a prominent family in Naples. She’s never wanted for a thing in her life.”

“When you live a life of extreme comfort, your understanding of good and bad gets skewed. When there really isn’t any bad, the good replaces the bad. People need both. There can be no good when there is no bad. Her bad consists of slightly less good, so the really good doesn’t feel right. Her soul knows that, which is why she’s wanting for something more. But she’s looking in the wrong places for that something. It has to come from within her. She’s the only one that can decide to be happy. Nobody else will ever be able to make her happy if she can’t make herself happy. That’s what you need to try to get her to see, Mando. She’s choosing to be miserable and insecure. No one else is making her feel that way. No one is going to be able to make her stop Teeling that way. It’s all on her,” I said.

Armando raised his eyebrow looking at me, He asked, in Italian, “do I want to know how much trauma you’ve had to endure to become this wise?”

I chuckled. “No you do not,” I responded in English.

“I think I’ll take her to my house for the rest of the week and weekend. Maybe a change of scenery will do her good. It’ll also keep her away from you guys, so I won’t need to worry about you guys handling this before I can fix it,” Armando said. He had a smile on his face when he said it, but he was legitimately worried as well. Knowing that even Stephen was angry meant that he had good reason to be worried.

Chapter Two Hundred Nineteen

Misha

I could see something was different about Giana when she and Armando walked into the office while the doctor was talking to Sephie. Giana had a look of contempt on her face watching Sephie talk that she'd never had before. I didn't like it. I could feel myself starting to get angry as I watched her watching Sephie talk to the doctor about brawn.

When the doctor asked Sephie how she had experience with the original formula of brawn, her entire demeanor changed. It was obvious. She immediately looked at the floor and her shoulders slumped. Adrik didn't even need to see her to know it happened. He just turned his chair toward her and extended his hand toward her. She got up, her eyes still on the floor, and moved to his lap. Before she sat down, she just said "my uncle."

This week has been rough on her. We've all seen it. She's looking like she looked after she and I were attacked, just without the concussion. How she looked after the ball, just without the hole in her hip. She was struggling. Adrik and Ivan seemed to know how to help her best, which was good, but Andrei was right. It was frustrating for the rest of us. We wanted to help her too, we just didn't know how. It was even making Stephen angry and that guy rarely gets angry.

I noticed Giana's eyes went wide when Sephie mentioned her uncle. Armando looked at her, a stern look on his face, almost like he was silently saying "I told you so." I waited for her to look at me. I knew she would. She was practically incapable of not staring at me at some point anytime she was around me. I'd caught her staring so many times it should've been embarrassing for her, but she kept doing it. Even after she got with Armando. It was so comical that I'd discussed adding it to the white board bet pools. How many times I could catch her staring in one day.

When she did finally look at me, I made it obvious that I'd seen her look of disgust and I gave her my own look of disgust in return. It did not matter to me if she was with Armando or not, she was going to find out that when it came to Sephie, all bets were off. She quickly looked to the floor, but I kept watching her until the doctor got up to leave.

Once the doctor was out of the office, Adrik moved Sephie to one of the couches, but I kept my eyes on Giana. She was arguing with Armando, but they were speaking Italian and talking quietly. I'm assuming so Sephie couldn't hear what was being said. Giana got up quickly and rushed out of the office. We all looked to Armando. Clearly something had just happened. He looked frustrated, and maybe a little angry, but he made an excuse about her not feeling well.

That's bullshit. If she didn't feel well, he would've gone with her.

In the way that only Ivan can, he called her out. "Embarrassment will do that."

Everyone was waiting for him to expand on that when Viktor walked back into the office. Ivan smirked, enjoying the moment, then said, "Glana left here last night convinced Sephie knew about withdrawals because she was a user. She found out today that wasn't the case and now she's embarrassed about it, but she's not mature enough to own up to her mistake yet, so she ran instead."

Nailed it. I knew Ivan was wise before the attempted kidnapping of Sephie, but somehow that experience made him infinitely more so. Or he's finally just letting us all see it. Ivan has always been insanely private, but it's clear that he's opened up to Sephie. They share similar trauma. It can be comforting to find someone who can relate, even if it's just a little bit, to what you've been through. I know Ivan has been through serious trauma. He talks in his sleep when he's troubled, just like Sephie does. He has horrible past experiences with a doctor, just like she does. I don't know the details, but I know I likely don't want to know the details. It's hard enough knowing what happened to Sophie.

Armando looked to Ivan, surprised. "You've been hanging around Sephie, haven't you? How did you know that?"

Sephie smiled her smile that could light up the room at Ivan. "Ivan has a very special set of skills," she said.

Armando nodded his head in agreement. He looked thoughtful for a moment, then looked at Sephie and said, "Sephie, I want to apologize on behalf of Giana. We argued for several hours last night. She was convinced that you'd been on drugs because you have so much knowledge about them."

I felt my anger rise to the surface. This bitch. How could anyone think that about Sephie? She doesn't even drink alcohol! And what does it matter if she was on drugs at one point? She's clearly not anymore, so who the fuck cares? Doesn't she know that people can change and improve their lives?

Before I really thought about it, I said, "and if she was? What then? Does that mean Giana gets a license to be a bitch to her? It changes nothing about who Sephie is today if she was or wasn't." I was angry, but I shouldn't have said that to Armando.

Surprisingly, he agreed with me, telling me he'd said the same thing to her the night before. He also said he wasn't sure where any of it was coming from in respect to Giann. I saw Sephie and Ivin having a silent conversation. I think he was checking to see if she was okay. She's had to deal with so much, this week especially. We were all worried that her nightmares were going to come back. Sephie nodded once to Ivan, letting him know she could handle it. He looked at Armando, his face serious. "I do. She's still so insecure with herself that this is her way to tear Sephie down to make herself feel better. You need to be careful with her, Mando,. She'll eventually do the same to you, if you don't stop it. She wouldn't have lasted five minutes in Sephie's life over the last few years. She doesn't know what happened, but on some level, she knows Sephie is stronger than she could ever be and instead of letting it inspire her to be better herself, she lets it make her more insecure about herself. She'll drag you down to her level if you don't demand she rise to yours or get lost."

Armando looked somewhat surprised at Ivan's words, asking how he and Sephie got to be so wise. When you're forced to live a life full of hardship, you learn more lessons about life in general. This was true of both Sephie and Ivan. Sephie, in her own always sarcastic way, told Armando as much.

I've always been the youngest of the group, until Sephie came into our lives. I was excited at first, because I finally felt like I wasn't the baby. Then I realized that she might be younger than me in years, but she's much older than I am in terms of experience. Sure, I've got experiences that she doesn't have, but that woman has been through more in her young life than I'll likely experience in the rest of mine. I find myself looking up to her. Just like Ivan pointed out, Sephie inspires me to be better. All of us to be better. I don't know how she's done it, but she's brought the best out of all of us. Even Stephen. None of us knew that guy was carrying around his secret for that long. We were becoming used to the idea that he may or may not be a serial killer and we were all strangely fine with that fact. Turns out he was just uncomfortable to tell us that he was gay. But because of Sephic, he's come out to us and now he's coming out of his shell around us. That guy is fucking hilarious and none of us knew it because he was afraid to be himself around us. Sephie showed him how much better life can be when you just decide to always be yourself. I constantly question whether that would've ever happened if Sephie hadn't come into our lives. I question whether a lot of things would have happened if she hadn't come into our lives.

And now this insecure bitch is trying to tear Sephie down because she's too scared to put in the work to make herself better. I didn't realize I said it out loud, but I cursed in Russian, my anger taking over for a moment.

Chapter Two Hundred Twenty

Misha

Armando laughed, telling me he wasn't sure what I'd said, but he'd likely said the same thing last night. I couldn't help but feel some relief that Armando was also angry and frustrated with this situation. If he was blindly siding with Giana over this, we would have bigger issues.

"With all due respect, Mando, you need to handle this before we do," Stephen said. I could hear the anger in his voice, as well. Somehow his anger justified mine. I knew if he was mad, it was a big deal. Sephie looked at Stephen, as well as the rest of us. I think she was just as surprised as the rest of us to hear the anger in his voice. He waited until Armando looked away, then he grinned at Sephie.

She was thoughtful for a moment. I watched her pull Adrik's arms tighter around her. Just like she was an anchor for all of us, he was that for her. She got stronger when she was with him, just as he got stronger when he was with her. They complimented each other in a way that I'd never seen before. She sighed and said, "she's probably grown up privileged and somewhat sheltered. Now that she's been thrown into the real world, she has no real coping mechanisms. She can only come from her place of understanding, which is made from her life experiences."

While she wasn't wrong, I did notice that Sephie tended to give people the benefit of the doubt a little too much. Sometimes a bitch is just a bitch. While she was hardly ever wrong about people, I found myself angry at her lack of anger at Giana. I knew she would get there eventually, if things didn't change. I'd seen what she said to Max and I knew how long it took her to get to that point. I wasn't sure I'd be able to handle it if it took her that long to get to that point with Giana, if this situation wasn't resolved quickly.

After Armando confirmed that Giana was, in fact, a spoiled rich kid, Sephie said, "When you live a life of extreme comfort, your understanding of good and bad gets skewed. When there really isn't any bad, the good replaces the bad. People need both. There can be no good when there is no bad. Her bad consists of slightly less good, so the really good doesn't feel right. Her soul. knows that, which is why she's wanting for something more. But she's looking in the wrong places for that something. It has to come from within her. She's the only one that can decide to be happy. Nobody else will ever be able to make her happy if she can't make herself happy. That's what you need to try to get her to see, Mando. She's choosing to be miserable and insecure. No one else is making her feel that way. No one is going to be able to make her stop feeling that way. It's all on her,"

I smiled, knowing that Sephie was exactly right, and that had Giana heard what Sephie just said, she likely would've been crushed until she could come to terms with it. Armando asked Sephie a question in Italian, which annoyed me. I enjoyed being the one that could keep everyone else in the dark when we spoke Russian in front of others. Sephie tried to laugh, but I saw the pain flash on her face quickly as she answered him.

My mind was wandering while Armando was still talking. Sephie had said that she wanted to go to the house a few days ago and we hadn't been able to go yet. Maybe I should bring it up again, after Armando left. I didn't know what it was about being- able to go to the lake that helped her recharge herself, but it was obvious every time it happened. I could literally watch the stress melt off her as we sat and talked by the lake.

My gut instinct was getting stronger, the more I used it. Before, I would just get a feeling when something wasn't going to go right. I would feel nauseous or feel like there was Impending doom coming to indicate that an outcome was going to be negative. But now, I was starting to get indicators on good outcomes as well. Completely different Indicators, thankfully, so I could tell the difference. As I thought about going to the house for a few days, I got goosebumps down my arms and across my upper body. It had only happened once or twice before, but I knew this was my gut instinct telling me we needed to go to the house. I would wait until Armando left and then suggest it.

I found myself looking forward to a long run with Sephie, too. She used to almost kill me when we went for a run at the

I'd been running with her long enough now that I could almost keep up with her at the house. I still gave out well before

getting better. It had been a while since we'd been able to run anywhere. I knew if I missed it, she was

1)

definitely missing it.

Armando talked for a while longer, telling us that he was purposely leaving Giana alone for as long as possible. He made plans. to go to his house for the weekend, which made me happy to know I wouldn't have to see her for a few days. He finally stood to leave. I couldn't help but feel relieved. I liked Armando, but I wanted him gone right now. I was having trouble getting my anger under control.

Once he was out of the office, I looked to Adrik and said frankly, "we should go to the house." I might've said it a little too frankly, as both he and Sephie looked at me, clearly surprised. Sephie, however, grinned at me almost immediately. She turned to look at Adrik, a question on her face. He looked at her for a moment, like he was lost in thought. I'd never seen him look at anyone the way he looks at her. A small smile crept over his face. He looked back to me, silently asking again for confirmation. I nodded my head. He looked down at his watch, then back to Sephie.

"We should order food before we leave so it's waiting on us when we get there. I'm hungry," he said. Sephie had leaned her head back on his shoulder so she could see his face. The smile that stretched across her face was enough to make all of us immediately feel better. Suddenly my anger was dissipating and I was now excited to go for a long run with her tomorrow.

"Gazelle, do you want to go for a run in the morning?" I asked. I had switched from struggling to contain my anger to now struggling to contain my excitement.

"Don't ask stupid questions, my adorable Russian guardian," she said as she looked at me seriously. For a moment, I thought she didn't want to and that I had offended her. She saw the look of surprise on my face and died laughing. "Misha, I'm sorry. You're too easy sometimes. Of course I want to go for a run and of course I love you for suggesting we go to the house. You're my favorite. Don't tell the others." She winked at me, her wide smile still making the room brighter. The guys were all laughing at me and I couldn't help but laugh with them. I think we all needed a break.

Chapter Two Hundred Twenty-One

Misha

“Can we take the long route today?” I asked Sephie as we were stretching for our run the following morning.

She looked at me, a serious look on her face. “Misha, is something wrong? You’re volunteering to torture yourself now? Is there something I need to know?”

I chuckled, then shrugged my shoulders. “It’s been a while since we’ve been able to go for a run. I didn’t realize how much I’ve grown to enjoy it.”

She slid her arm around my waist. I was so much taller than she was that her head fit right in my armpit. I would usually try to get her to sniff my armpit whenever I could to annoy her, but this time I surprised her by wrapping my arms around her and picking her up. It always made her laugh and I really needed to hear her laugh right now,

When I set her down, she was still laughing. “We can go for as long of a run as you like, my adorable Russian guardian. But we should maybe tell someone that you’re going to need two lunches instead of one.”

“Maybe three,” I said, contemplating how far it was around the entire lake.

We didn’t usually talk when we ran until the end when we were walking back to the house to catch our breath. It was actually one of the things I liked about running with Sephie. By myself, I would always listen to music because I didn’t like the quiet. But with her, it was completely different. We were quiet, but it wasn’t the same quiet. It wasn’t a lonely quiet. I found myself thinking through lots of things when I would run with her where I couldn’t when I ran by myself. It didn’t make sense, really, but I felt like she was a calming force anytime she was around.

I managed to keep up with her the entire time, which was a huge confidence boost for me. I had struggled to make it the entire way the last time we took the long route, but this time felt easier. Maybe it was because I was missing it more.

As we neared our stopping point for the walk back to the house, Sephie looked at me, grinning. Her smile was infectious.

“Misha, I’m so happy that you suggested we come to the house. And I’m even happier you wanted to take the long route this morning. I didn’t realize how much I needed this,” she said as she turned toward me with her arms open for a hug. Seeing the smile on her face made me so happy. I bent down and picked her up into a bear hug, making her laugh again.

“It makes me happy to see you happy, gazelle. This week has been rough for you. I’m really glad I could give you at least a little bright spot,” I said, spinning her around. I loved hearing her laugh.

As I set her down, she said, “it’s been a rough week for everyone, not just me. I clearly saw the pain on your face after I fell asleep in the office and started talking in my sleep. Misha, I never meant to put that on you, or any of the other guys.” Her smile faded and she looked at me seriously as we walked back to the house.

I was trying to find the right words to say to her, I knew she didn’t like to open up. I understood. Her story was not a happy one. “Sephie…” I started to speak, but she cut her eyes over to me.

“Uh oh, it’s serious. You used my name Instead of culling me gazelle,” she said smiling.

I cleared my throat, looking at her as seriously as I could manage, which arguably wasn’t that serious, “Sephie,” I said, trying not to smile. I put my hand on her shoulder to stop her. I wanted to get this out before we got back to the house. I wanted to capitalize on my alone time with her. She looked at me, surprised, but she stopped and turned to face me. I continued, “Sephie, I look up to you. Maybe more than I’ve ever looked up to anyone in my life. You might be younger than me, but you’re leaps

you keep us all laughing, you catch on to things so quickly, and you bring the brightest light into my life. Now that I know what you’ve been through and that you’re still, well, you? It makes me want to work harder to be worthy of your friendship. To be even half the person you are. I look at you and Boss and I’ve never seen anything like what you two have, but I know I want my owry version of it. You do so much for all of us. I just want to be able to give back and be able to be the same for you that you are for me”

I could see the tears welling up in her eyes as I talked. I felt my own tears threatening to fall, but I needed to say this. I needed her to know how much she meant to not just me, but to all of us. Guaranteed, every single one of the guys had thought about having this conversation with her, if they hadn’t had it already. Now that I’d started to tell her what I’d been thinking about, I wasn’t sure I could stop it. “It’s hard for us to hear about what happened to you in your past, not because we can’t handle it, per se. Although I must admit that I’ve wondered if I could’ve survived everything you have and still been able to see the humor in the world. I can’t imagine what it was like to go through everything you’ve been through, but it hurts knowing you had to endure it. Simply because you mean so much to me, to all of us, and we want nothing but the best for you, always. Hearing that you’ve had to go through what you have is frustrating, like Andrei said, but only because we know there’s nothing we can do to take that pain away from you. What I can do, however, is always be here when you need someone to talk to. Or not talk to. Or to take the long route with. Whatever you need, Sephie. Whenever you need it. I’ll be here. So will the other guys. I love you and want to always see you happy, if only because of the joy you bring to my life when you are happy. I know the other guys feel the same way, if they haven’t already told you,”

She had a few tears falling down her face as she listened to me. For once, she looked like she didn’t know what to say. She just smiled and wrapped her arms around me, resting her head on my chest. She took a deep breath, but didn’t let go, so I kept my arms around her. “Misha, you only ever have to worry about being you. Each of you has a special role to play in my life, just as I have a special role to play in yours. You bring your own uniqueness to my life and I couldn’t imagine my life without that now. It seems silly to say. I haven’t even known you for a year yet, but I can’t imagine my life without you and the other guys in it. You guys always say I’ve brought so much to your lives, but I can say the same for you. You’ve all brought so much to my life. I can’t even begin to tell you what it means to me to always feel safe with all of you. That right there is worth more than anything to me. But you’re so much more than that. You love the fuckery as much as I do and quite frankly that’s my favorite thing about you. Your Intuition is quickly becoming unparalleled, too. I saw your faraway look right before you ordered Adrik to. come to the house,” she said as she looked up at me, grinning. “It’s starting to work on positive outcomes too, isn’t it?”

I just shook my head. “Of course you would notice.” I grinned down at her. She kept one arm around my waist and I kept one arm around her shoulders as we started walking toward the house again. “It hasn’t happened as much, but I get different feelings when it’s a positive outcome. It’s helpful, really. It makes it clear so I can tell the difference.”

“So, negative outcomes are still like a feeling of dread or nausea?” she asked. I nodded my head. “What are positive outcomes then?”

“So far, it’s been goosebumps over my arms and upper body,” I said.

She stopped. She looked lost in thought for a moment before she looked up at me. “That’s a powerful sign, Misha. My mom used to tell me that was the way to know a universal truth. Did you get goosebumps when you thought about us coming to the house yesterday?”

“Yep.”

“Were you just thinking about coming to the house or was there something more specific?”

I thought for a moment. “I was thinking about how you’ve been looking like you did after the attack on us, just without the concussion. And then how you looked after the ball, just without the hole in your hip. I thought about how coming here and being able to go to the lake always seems to recharge you somehow. Then I thought I should suggest we come to the house and that’s when it happened.”

She giggled. “That’s why you were so frank about coming here. You never give orders, but you sure as shit gave Adrik an order.

Chapter Two Hundred Twenty-Two

Misha

I felt my cheeks blush. “I honestly didn’t mean for it to come out like that,” I said, somewhat sheepishly.

She laughed again. “Don’t worry, my adorable Russian guardian, he thought it was funny. He appreciated your frankness because he knew it was ultimately for my benefit.” We walked a few more steps, then she stopped again. “I want you to pinky swear that you will always be that frank when you get that reaction,” she said, holding her pinky up to me.

“What does that mean?” I asked, completely confused.

“Jesus, what do you people do in Russia as children? Not pinky swear, I know that.” She sighed. “Okay, so the pinky swear is the holiest of holy swears. Like so holy that legend has it Jesus only used it once then promptly had his pinkies removed so he could never use it again. It’s that serious,” she said. She was trying not to laugh at her own explanation, but she ended up giggling through most of it.

“Okay, so how do I do the holiest of holy swears?” I asked, clearly amused at her. This felt like a secret that only she and I had, even though I’d heard her and Adrik talking about it before. That was one of the things we all loved about Sephie. She had little things that she did with all of us that clearly meant something to her, not even caring a little bit that it was silly and childish.

She lifted her hand, with her pinky out. “Give me your pinky,” she said. I held my hand in front of me, matching hers. She grabbed my pinky with hers and said, “you pinky swear you will always be frank when you get the goosebumps reaction.” She looked at me like she was waiting for me to say it too, so I repeated it back to her. She grinned at me, completely satisfied in our holiest of holy swears.

Strangely enough, I felt compelled to always honor it. It might’ve been silly and childish, but when it comes to Sephie, all bets

are off.

Sephie

Misha and I walked the rest of the way to the house, laughing, but he kept his arm around my shoulders and I kept mine around his waist. I loved that they all humored me and my silliness. I hoped they never stopped.

As we got to the doors of the house, Viktor met us with his phone in hand. “Chen,” he said, motioning us to follow him. He walked quickly back to the kitchen, everyone else waiting for us. I glanced at Misha, trying not to laugh at feeling like we were somehow in trouble.

Viktor put his phone on speaker and handed it to me.

“What’s up, Chen? Sorry to keep you waiting,” I said.

“No worries, my girl. I know how you are when you go for a run. I was expecting to wait for another hour, minimum, so technically you’re back early,” he said, laughing.

I couldn’t help but laugh. Apparently, I’m slightly more predictable than I thought. “What did you find out?”

“I talked to Trino’s guy. Gus is his name. He said he wanted to meet with you and your giant security people and then he said Trino called him and told him he had to, so that’s happening. Gus also talked to the couple other guys that are kind of running things with him. They want in as well. And, uh, when were you going to tell me that you datin’ Ghost? Like THE Ghost? Like THE man that runs the whole damn city?” he said. He sounded like he was trying to be mad, but he was likely scared as he just now realized how big this really was.

I glanced to Adrik, who just smirked at me as he walked the few steps to me and the phone. He asked Chen, “that’s not a problem, is it?”

“Oh, fuck me that’s him, isn’t it? No, sir. No problem at all, sir,” Chen said. I could hear the nervousness in his voice now. I couldn’t help but laugh. Adrik was clearly enjoying this as well.

“Chen, relax. You’ve done nothing but help us in all of this. You have nothing to worry about,” I said, trying to help calm him 1 down. He was quiet for a moment. I thought he had hung up. “Chen? You okay, man?”

“I’m okay, but holy shit this is way bigger than I thought,” he said. We could all hear the fear in his voice now.

Adrik took the phone from me with one hand and wrapped his other arm around my waist. “Chen, you can get out now and no harm done. Sephie was right. You’ve done us a massive favor. You’ll be safe as long as you’re in the city, you have my word. You can always call us if you’re in trouble, too. This is big. Really big. No harm if you want out now.”

Chen was quiet for a moment again. He was struggling with what to do. “I appreciate your offer, sir. But I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night knowing this was going on and I didn’t try to help stop it. I’m still in. I’ll do whatever I can to help.”

Adrik said, “I’m glad to hear that, Chen. Are you up for being the liaison between us and the dealers for now? I prefer to stay as anonymous as I can, but Sephie trusts you, which means I can trust you.”

“Yes, sir. I can do that.”

“Good, Chen. We’ll get back to you with a place to meet on Monday and a time. Can you make sure Gus and the other guys that have taken charge are there?” Adrik asked.

“Absolutely, sir.”

“We’ll be in touch,” Adrik said, ending the call. I couldn’t help but laugh a little at how scared poor Chen was. I think his reaction surprised me, honestly. Adrik could be intimidating, for sure, but I just didn’t think of him that way. It was a new experience to see the fear firsthand.

“I had no idea that your reputation was so ominous,” I said, grinning up at him. He just smirked down at me,

“Who do you want meeting with them and where?” Viktor asked.

Adrik was quiet for a moment. He looked at Misha as he said, “all of us.” I didn’t need to look at Misha to know that he was checking outcomes. Adrik’s face softened slightly, so I knew he’d gotten approval.

Misha said, “it needs to be all of us.” His voice was serious enough to know that he was honoring his pinky swear. I turned around to look at him, smiling. He was standing with his hands on his hips. He winked at me, tapping his pinky finger against his hip.

“Good. I need Sephie to be there to make sure we can trust the other dealers,” Adrik said. He pulled me closer to him.

“Where do you want this to happen? I’m not sure your office is the right place. It’s not being watched, but it would be obvious should anyone see them there,” Viktor said.

“Agreed. I don’t necessarily want them at the building until we know we can trust them.” Adrik said.

“What about my old apartment? Chen said it was basically no man’s land there. Like that part of the city doesn’t really belong to any one boss. They’re likely not watching it. And it was easy enough to secure when I went to talk to Chen, right?” I asked, looking between Viktor and Stephen.

Stephen agreed. “Yeah, it’s got a couple great vantage points where we can see everyone coming and going.”

Adrik looked to Misha, who had that faraway look in his eyes as he was checking outcomes. “It’s good,” he said.

“Let Chen know. Monday night. I prefer to do this well after dark, if possible,” Adrik said. He leaned down, pressing his lips to mine. He smiled against my lips, saying, “it helps perpetuate my ominous reputation.”

Chapter Two Hundred Twenty-Three

Adrik was laying across the bed, lost in thought as he waited for me to finish drying my hair. 1 hader's planned on washingt after Misha and I got back from our run this morning, but since Adrik couldn't keep his hands off me in the dyr,

my

hair was washed and now needed to be dried. It was getting colder outside and he knows how much I hate to be cold, so he Insisted.

I walked to the bed, climbing on top of him. His hands immediately went to my neck and my hair as 1 fald down on top of him. He clicked his tongue. "Your hair is still wet, solnishko. I don't want you to catch a crid "

I laughed. "I'd be in there for like another hour if you want me to dry my hair completely. It's dry enough. I won't catch cold" 1 snuggled into him. He wrapped his arms around me, holding me close. "Especially not if I have you to keep me warm."

"I'll make you wear a hat later," he said. It sounded like a threat, so I picked my head up to look at him. He laughed at my expression. "I'm leaving my phone with Viktor this afternoon and you and I are going to the lake. For as long as you'd like to stay," he said, fighting his usual battle with the curls around my face. He looked more amused than usual with my hair. He smiled, adding, "your curls are even more out of control when you use the hair dryer. I didn't think that was possible"

I laughed. "It's why I don't usually use the hair dryer. My hair revolts, which is a situation hobody wants." I loved watching the wonderment on his face as he tried to get my hair to obey his wishes. "You're really going to ditch work this afternoon?" !

asked.

He nodded his head, taking a deep breath. "I could use a break, too, and I can't think of a better way to spend the afternoon than with you, away from everyone."

I couldn't stop the smile that spread across my face. I couldn't think of a better way to spend an afternoon than with him, either. He pulled me down to him, pressing his lips against mine.

We were sitting in silence by the lake. It was one of the many things I loved about Adrik. His ability to be comfortable in the silence was unmatched. I had a feeling he loved it about me too. We had talked on the way to the lake. He kept his fingers laced through mine the entire way. He would steal glances at me as we were walking and talking, like he enjoyed watching me more than the scenery around us.

We were sitting on the ground, leaned up against an old tree that had fallen years ago. He finally broke the silence, saying, "this has always been my favorite spot to come to when I needed a break from everything. It's why I bought this house."

I leaned my head over on his shoulder. "It was a good purchase. There's something magical about this place. Even Misha knows it, without knowing it. It's why he ordered you to bring me here," I said, giggling.

He laughed too. "That kid has never given an order in his life." He laughed harder thinking about it.

"I made him promise to do it more if he gets the response he did about coming here. It's a powerful reaction that he gets now and I made him pinky swear he would always tell us," I said. Adrik reached over and put his arm across my legs, pulling them toward him. I held onto his arm as we talked.

"Is it the same reaction he's always had or it's a new one now?" he asked.

"New. He used to only get a reaction when something was going to go wrong. He said since he's been using it more, now he can get a reaction when something is going to go right. It's a different reaction to each, so he can tell the difference. When he thought about coming here, he wasn't just thinking about the house, and he got goosebumps. My mom used to tell me goosebumps were how you know universal truths. Like when someone tells you something and you get goosebumps on your

body? It's a universal truth and your body recognizes it," I said.

Adrik was quiet for a moment, then chuckled. "You've given me goosebumps when you've told me things before, solnishko." He leaned down and kissed the top of my head. "What was Misha thinking about when he thought about coming here?"

"He said he was looking at me when we were talking about Glana, thinking about how I looked like I did after we got attacked, just without the concussion, and how I looked after the ball, just without the hole in my hip. He knows that coming to the lake recharges me, if you will. He said he got goosebumps when he thought about it, so he waited until Armando left and that's when he basically ordered you to come here," I said, still laughing at his delivery.

He moved to look at me, surprise on his face. "Misha saw that too?"

"Saw what?"

"That your light had dimmed again."

I shrugged my shoulders. "He didn't say it exactly like that, but he noticed."

"Maybe I underestimated the rest of them," he said. I looked at him, expecting him to finish his thought, but he stayed quiet. The wind had picked up slightly as we were sitting by the lake. We both heard a loud clap of thunder that sounded like it was almost above us. I sat up and looked behind us to see that a storm had blown in quickly while we were at the lake. Adrik saw it too. He stood up, pulling me up with him. "We should head back. That doesn't look like it's going to blow over," he said, watching the sky. Just as he said that, a streak of lightning stretched across the sky, followed quickly by another loud clap of thunder. I felt the first few raindrops start to fall.

I looked at him, trying not to laugh. "What gives you that impression?" He grinned at me, grabbing my hand as we started to walk quickly back to the house. The trees in the forest kept us from getting rained on, but once we got to the other side of the forest by the back lawn of the house, it had started pouring. There was no way to avoid getting wet. The temperature was dropping with the storm, as well, making the rain cold and biting. Despite running back to the house, we were completely soaked and I was shivering when we made it to the back door. The guys were all on the couches when we got back, mostly amused that we'd gotten soaked. Ivan and Misha were especially excited. Apparently, they'd all seen the storm coming, so they made a bet to see whether we would make it back before the storm hit. Ivan and Misha said we wouldn't, so they were the

winners.

"You're welcome!" I yelled as we ran upstairs to change into dry clothes. Adrik turned the hot water in the shower on, puling me inside before I even had a chance to take any clothes off. I couldn't help but laugh. "And you were worried about my hair earlier," I said, grinning at him. He peeled his shirt off before doing the same to mine. He pulled me under the water as he worked on getting my pants off. I was still shivering, despite the hot water. 1 laughed at our pile of wet clothes in the corner of the shower. Adrik seemed concerned about getting me warm, but he was also amused at how our afternoon turned out.

He bent down and picked me up, wrapping my legs around his waist as he made sure I was under the water, trying to get me warm. He flinched when I wrapped my legs around him. "Your legs are so cold, solnishko," he said, running one hand up and down my leg rapidly to try and warm me up. He looked up at me, still laughing about our situation.

"It might not have ended the way I wanted, but I'm so happy I got to spend time with you this afternoon. Hopefully your phone didn't drive Viktor crazy while we were gone," I said.

"You look even lighter, solnishko. Who knew getting caught in the rain was so healthy?" he said, still laughing.

I unwrapped my legs from his waist and stood in front of him, but stayed under the water as I was still cold. "I owe Misha one for ordering you to bring me here," I said, grinning at him. "I needed this break, I think."

"Let's maybe not let him know that he can order me around so easily," he said, smiling at me. He leaned down and kissed me. "I

needed a break, too. I was happy he ordered me to come here. But let's keep that between us for now."

Chapter Two Hundred Twenty-Four

Sephie

I put on the warmest clothes | had at the house and was still cold, even after the hot showwer Adrik walked out of the closet with a sweatshirt. “Here, solnishko. Put this on. It will help. Let’s go get you something warm to drink, ton,” he said. He waited for me to pull his sweatshirt on, then grabbed my hand pulling me toward the door. “Do you want some tea?” he asked on our way down the stairs.

“The only tea I really like is what I use to sleep and I don’t want to sleep right now. Coffee sounds good, though. If nothing else, it might make me hyper enough that I warm myself up from not being able to sit still,” I said as I jumped down the stairs behind him, laughing.

“That seems like a good life choice for you right now,” he said, shaking his head at my shenanigans. “I will make you some coffee, love.” He stopped at the bottom of the stairs, pulling me to him to kiss me.

“This is why you’re my favorite,” I said, smiling against his lips. “You don’t have to worry about not telling the others, though. They already know, trust me. It’s not a secret.”

He laughed, wrapping his arms around me. “I love you, Sephie.”

“Is it because you’re looking forward to me having endless energy later? Because I’d love me for that too,” I asked, laughing

He cursed under his breath. I could see where his mind was going “I’m going to make your coffee extra strong,” he said, a devilish grin on his face.

“Challenge accepted.”

Viktor was in the kitchen when we walked in. Adrik asked him what he’d missed while we were at the lake As they were talking

business and Adrik was making coffee, I walked to the back room to see who was there. The storm was still going strong outside and I wanted to watch the lightning as well. The back room had the best windows in the whole house,

Ivan and Misha were on the couches when I walked in. “Where’s Bubba and Yoden?” I asked as I walked to the windows to watch the storm clouds outside. I pulled my hands in the too-long sleeves and crossed my arms across my chest, trying to stay warm. I heard Ivan click his tongue, but he didn’t say anything, he just got up and walked toward their rooms.

Misha answered, “they’re playing video games. They’re playing against Keith and Chris right now.”

I looked at him, grinning. “Do I need to ask who is winning?”

“Only if you’ve hit your head recently and have no clue what’s going on around you,” he said, laughing.

Ivan walked back in with a beanie in his hand. He walked up to me, pulling it on my head. “Princess, you have to keep your head warm if you expect the rest of you to stay warm” I had braided my hair when we got out of the shower, because I just didn’t feel like dealing with having to dry it again. Ivan picked my still damp braid up and said, “especially if your hair is still wet.” He smacked me lightly with my braid as he went to the couch again.

Adrik walked in with a steaming cup of coffee, handing it to me. He had one in his hand as well, which made me smirk at him. He couldn’t help but grin at me as he took a sip. I felt my cheeks flush. In an effort to distract myself from thoughts of what was going to happen later, I asked, “how bad was your phone while we were gone?”

“Not terrible, but I do have a couple of phone calls I need to return. It shouldn’t take too long,” he said. He was looking over

the beanie that Ivan had put on me. “Are you still cold, solnishko?” he asked. His eyes were still amused.

“How are you not?” I asked, surprised that he wasn’t cold in the feast.

He clicked his tongue. “Drink your coffee. It will help. I’ll be back soon,” he said. He leaned down, his lips close to my ear. “I have an idea to make you warm again. Several ideas.” He lightly brushed his short facial hair against my cheek, then kissed my cheek, making my mind race about what exactly he had planned later. He saw me bite my bottom lip and smirked at me before. leaving with Viktor.

I stood by the windows, watching the storm and drinking my extra strong coffee for a few minutes. The lightning was almost constant. It was beautiful to watch.

“It doesn’t make you nervous to be standing by the window while the sky is basically on fire, gazelle?” Misha asked.

I turned toward him, already feeling the effects of the caffeine boost. “Nope. My mom told me I was born in the middle of a storm like this. I’ve always been fascinated by them.”

Ivan looked surprised. “My mom told me the same thing.”

“It’s why you’re both all feisty and shit,” Misha said, looking between Ivan and me. His wide, handsome smile stretched across his face.

“Did your mom tell you that children born in storms should never fear the dark because the light is always with them?” I asked Ivan.

“She did not. She did, however, tell me to stop breaking bones. She did that quite a lot,” he said.

“I can imagine you were barely contained as a child, Super Squish.” I looked at Misha, who was still smiling. “And you, my adorable Russian guardian, I’m convinced you got away with murder because you were so adorable. Your poor mothers,” I said, shaking my head, but smiling at the thought of both of them as rowdy little kids. I turned back to look out the windows. A giant streak of lightning stretched across the sky, immediately followed by a second, even brighter streak across the sky and a loud crack of thunder. It was so loud that I didn’t hear Misha get up from the couch. I felt his hands on my shoulders pulling me back from the windows.

“You make me nervous, gazelle. Maybe don’t stand so close to the windows while the sky is angry,” he said. He walked back to the couch, sitting once more.

“Which one of you is warmer?” I asked, walking closer to the couches. “Never mind. I’ll run my own experiment,” I said, sitting beside Misha. I curled up next to him as he threw his arm over my shoulders.

“Are you still cold, gazelle?” he asked. I just put my cold hand on his face, laughing at his reaction.

Andrei and Stephen walked in as I was still laughing at Misha. “Spider monkey, you look like you’re frozen,” Andrei said, plopping down on one of the couches. Stephen, in his normal quiet way, walked to the kitchen.

“Not completely frozen. Slightly thawed, but not room temperature yet,” I said. “I’m currently conducting research to find out which one of you is the warmest. Misha’s data set is looking like the low end so far.” He wrapped his other arm around me and then threw one of his legs over me as well, trying to help me warm up. He stayed like that for a few minutes, with me laughing. trapped underneath him. “Not helping.” I pushed him off me and moved next to Ivan. He threw his giant arm over my shoulders as I curled up next to him. “Warmer than Misha.”

“Hey, I warmed you up by making you laugh. It should count,” Misha said, feigning outrage.

“I’ll make mention of it in the results section of my report,” I said, grinning at him. I looked at Andrei, asking, “did Keith and Chris get tired of getting virtually killed by you and Yoden?”

He chuckled, nodding his head. Stephen walked to one of the couches, saying, “I’m going to be saving their asses for a while.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Let’s just say it’s a good thing it was a video game and not real life,” Stephen said.

“Ouch,” I said. Ivan really was much warmer than Misha. I found myself moving closer to him, trying to finally get warm. Andrei noticed me moving and opened his arms to me. “Come here, spider monkey. I’m always hot.” I grinned at him as I got up and moved next to him as he threw his giant arm around my shoulders. “Warmer than Ivan. This explains why you’re totally fine in a t-shirt right now,” I said.

“Told you. I’m always hot,” Andrei said,

“Mental note taken, Bubba,” I said as I moved closer to Andrei. I finished my coffee and was almost warm again. Almost. We stayed quiet for a few minutes, listening to the thunder rumble outside. It was still loud. It sounded like the storm was sitting directly above us, not moving. Andrei really was quite warm and I finally felt my body start to relax next to him. My mind. wandered back to the week we’d all had. I glanced at each of them, asking, “how do you guys cope after you’ve killed somebody?” Andrei’s giant arm held me tighter. They all looked at me, knowing looks on their faces.

Chapter Two Hundred Twenty-Five

Sephie

Ivan sighed. "It's different each time, princess. Some I still regret. The first ones," he said, knowing I would know what he was talking about.

"Why those? Those are the ones I would think you felt the least regret about, Squish. They clearly had it coming," I said.

He thought for a minute. "Yes and no. I still think a few of them were mostly innocent. They were just in the way."

I could tell that Misha and Stephen were curious about what we were talking about, but trying to be respectful of Ivan's privacy. Andrei just kept a tight hold on me. Stephen looked at me, his usual serious look on his face. "It might be disturbingly easy for me, since I'm usually nowhere near my targets. I think about that sometimes and worry that I might be a serial killer."

Misha caught my eye, trying not to laugh. I looked at Stephen, "Yoden, if I'm being honest here, we've all wondered about that as well." I tried not to laugh, but I couldn't contain it when he started laughing as well.

"I mean, I am like the textbook personality for it. Quiet, keeps to myself, never had many friends..

"Until now," Misha said. Stephen looked at Misha, clearly surprised, Ivan and Andrei both nodded in agreement. I watched as Stephen's cheeks flushed.

"You're part of the family, man. You know that, right?" Andrei said.

Stephen was speechless for a moment. "I mean, I guess so," he said, still clearly surprised.

"You just never believed it until it was said out loud?" I asked.

He looked at me, smiling. "Clearly not."

"Then I'll say it again, so you get it through that giant brain. You're family," Ivan said. Ivan and Stephen were similar in their delivery methods. While Ivan was heavy on the intimidation factor when needed, Stephen could say virtually anything with a straight face. Ivan went easy on the intimidation in this case, but his tone was very serious. He wanted to make sure Stephen

believed him.

I got up and moved next to Stephen. I knew he wasn't as affectionate as the other guys, so I just hooked my arm through his. We could clearly see him actively working to keep his emotions in check. I just said quietly to him, "life wouldn't be the same without you in it." He looked over at me, with tears in his eyes. He wrapped his arm around my shoulders and pulled me closer.

I stayed next to Stephen for a few minutes, but then jumped up and ran back to Andrei. "You're colder than Misha!" I said as I curled up next to Andrei again. They all laughed at me, while Andrei moved so I could lean back against his chest, helping me warm up again. "Plot twist, Stephen's not a serial killer. He's a vampire."

"Wouldn't those things essentially be the same though?" Misha asked. This sparked an entire debate on whether vampires could be considered serial killers. We were still heavily debating the topic when Adrik and Viktor walked in.

"You guys are very serious about whatever you're talking about," Viktor said.

Stephen, as only he could, said, "oh, we're discussing whether or not I'm a vampire and then whether or not that also makes me

a serial killer."

The looks on Viktor and Adrik's faces were enough to make us all erupt into a fit of laughter. Adrik looked at me, amused. "How do I already know that you're behind this conversation?"

Andrei wrapped his arm around me like he was protecting me. "In her defense, it started as a very serious conversation about how to cope after killing someone. We just got distracted. It's not her fault," he said like he was the older brother taking the heat for his favorite little sister.

Adrik sat on the other end of the couch from me and Andrei. His face showed clear amusement at Andrei's defense of me, as well as his protective arm around me. I could tell he wanted me to come to him, but I also wanted to be bratty to see how long I could make him wait, so I stayed next to Andrei. He was warm enough. I could manage for a little longer.

Five minutes. I lasted five whole minutes before I had to move to Adrik.

Adrik

It was still early Monday morning when I woke. Sephie had moved off my chest, for once, and was curled up next to me under the covers. She so rarely needed the covers when she was on my chest, but it was getting colder outside. She woke me up when she moved. I was so used to having her laying across me while I slept that not having her there felt weird. I rolled over and pulled her hack against me. She was still sleeping, but she hugged my arms tightly.

My mind was replaying the whole weekend. I was grateful for Misha's order to come here. It was exactly what all of us needed. We had a chance to relax over the weekend, but Sephie actually opened up and talked to all of us throughout the weekend. About everything. Past and present. And in turn, the guys opened up.

We were close before Sephie came into our lives, but it usually took one of us almost dying before we had a serious. conversation with each other. I don't know why we couldn't just talk to each other without the threat of imminent death, but we didn't. We waited. We held it in. I was probably more guilty than the rest of them at holding things in. I'm the boss. Never weak.

As is her way. Sephie shined a light on all our darkest places, showing us that what we'd been protecting from the world for fear of being seen as weak wasn't a weakness at all. It made us stronger. Sometimes seeing your own traits in someone else makes you realize that what you've been silently dealing with for years has made you infinitely stronger. Sephie has done that for all of us, but I think most of all, me

As I watch her step into her true potential, her true power, I can see the same traits in her that I've had for years. She has a mind for my businesses. All of my businesses. Whether legal or not. One of the reasons my father stepped aside and put me in charge when I was still barely 20 years old was because of my business sense. He saw that I was smart enough and mature enough to handle the business side, even though I was still young. I doubled many of his businesses in the first few years and started a few of my own that ultimately became highly successful. It's what's allowed him to still live like a king since he put

me in charge.

The other bosses have all hesitated to put their sons in charge, despite being many years older than my father. With good reason, for most of them. Their sons are idiots. Or in Salvadori's case, they're just plain evil. While everyone needed to have a capacity for evil to make it in the underworld, Anthony took that to the extreme. He made me look forward to his death.

That bothers me now that Sephie is in my life. My bloodlust was never something that I thought much about before her. It was needed. It was necessary. People needed to fear me, especially when I first took over. My bloodlust made that possible. But since Sephie had come into my life, that part of me has taken a back seat. I worried that she would look at me differently once she saw the full extent of that side of me. I worried that it would be too much for her.

Like she was reading my mind, Sephie rolled over to face me. She was still asleep, but she successfully broke me from my worried thoughts. I smiled to myself, watching her sleep. I ran my hand over her back and through her hair, causing her to bury her face in my chest.

I felt the pull in my chest as I thought about just how much I loved her. Every little thing about her made me love her more. Talking about the possibility of Stephen being a vampire and whether that also made him a serial killer in the middle of a thunderstorm made me love her more. The way she tried to stay next to Andre to make me think she was somewhat angry with me for blaming her for the silly conversation made me love her more. The fact that she couldn't last longer than five minutes reminded me that she's the only one for me.

Sephie moved her arm around my waist, pulling me closer to her in her sleep. I still don't understand how she can read my mind, even when she's sleeping, but I love it about her. She knows what I need before I do when she's not even conscious. It makes me try harder to figure out what she needs. I ran my hand down her back to her thigh, pulling her leg over mine so she would be even closer. She inhaled deeply, making her cooing noises. Knowing she was peacefully sleeping after the week she'd just had was one of the best feelings I'd ever experienced. I would give my entire empire, everything I had, to make sure she was safe and happy and knew she was loved. Nothing was worth it without her.

Chapter Two Hundred Twenty-Six

Adrik

“Are we taking bets on whether Chen is going to pi ss himself tonight?” Stephen asked as we were preparing to go to Sephie’s old apartment to meet with the dealers in charge.

“I think he’s ruined at least three pairs of pants since he had to talk to Boss the other day,” Ivan said. We all got a little too much enjoyment out of Chen’s fear.

“You guys better be nice to him. He’s helped us out,” Sephie said, trying to make sure they weren’t going to haze him in some way during the meeting.

“We’re always nice, princess,” Ivan said, pretending to be offended.

Stephen left first, with two other guys, to set up across the street from the apartment building. They had good vantage points and could see everyone coming and going. I did not like surprises, especially when Sephie was involved. It helped to ease my worry to see Stephen growing closer to Sephie. I knew he would do whatever was necessary to make sure she was protected. She’d helped him come out of his shell over the past few months. Like Ivan, he was so much funnier after having been around Sephie. I was convinced we’d all laughed more since Sephie showed up than we had our entire lives. I never wanted it to end.

On the elevator down to the parking garage, I pulled Sephie closer. She looked up at me, her eyes smiling at me. “You stay close to either me or Ivan the entire time, got it?” She smiled her sweet smile up at me, causing my heart to skip in my chest.

“I promise,” she said. She’d told us all over the weekend, a couple of times even, that she was eternally grateful to all of us for making her feel safe. It was a feeling she’d been missing in her life since her m om had died. She said she never realized how much she had missed it until she had us to make her feel safe once again. I could see it plainly on every guy’s face that they would do whatever it took to make sure she always felt safe with us, in any situation.

She stood on her toes, her lips finding mine. It was these little moments, the ones that seemed insignificant, that I found myself enjoying more and more. These moments made me think I’d never get enough of her, never get tired of her, never want to be without her.

We pulled into the parking lot of Sephie’s old apartment building. We were early, but Chen was already there. Sephie giggled. “Stephen, you might be right. He might pi ss himself tonight,” she said. She knew that even though he wasn’t physically with us. he could hear us through his earpiece..

“Stephen said he was here even before they got here. He’s worried. He’s been checking outside constantly,” Ivan said. “If he’s only worried about Boss, that’s one thing. But if he’s worried about something else, I don’t like it.”

“I’ll talk to him. If he’s checking outside, he’s probably looking for us,” Sephie said.

I extended my hand to her to get out of the vehicle. She put her hand in mine, climbing out. I pulled her to me, looking at her seriously, “with Ivan. Then bring him up. I’d like to speak to him before everyone else gets here.” I leaned down and kissed her

gently.

“Consider it done,” she said, grinning at me.

Ivan walked around the vehicle, his game face on. He put his hand on the small of her back, directing her toward Chen’s apartment. I caught Misha’s eye, “go with them,” I said nodding toward Ivan and Sephie. He couldn’t keep the smile from his face as he jogged to catch up to them.

Viktor walked up the stairs first, with Andrei behind me. Sephie’s old apartment was just how she left it, just without her

clothes and mementos. All her furniture was still there. I kept the apartment in the beginning, just in case she ever decided she didn’t want to be with me and wanted to go back. I knew now that was highly unlikely, but I still kept the apartment and kept it cleaned regularly. It was proving to be useful tonight.

We could hear Sephie’s conversation with Chen through the earpieces. Poor guy was terrified to meet me. Sephie was trying to calm his nerves before they came upstairs. She eventually got him calm enough to come up. His eyes went wide when he walked into the apartment to see me standing with Viktor and Andrei.

“Is there like a height and weight requirement to be a part of this? Because I feel inadequate,” Chen said to Sephie. He tried to say it quietly, but we all heard him. Sephie had her own earpiece.

Before she could answer him, I stepped forward, extending my hand to Chen. I was trying to put him at ease. He had done us a huge favor by gathering information and I wanted to make sure he knew I was appreciative. “Chen, it’s nice to meet you in person. Thank you for everything you’ve done so far,” I said.

He looked scared, but he shook my hand firmly, looking me in the eye. That was a good sign. He was trying to be bold.

“Yes, sir. Uh, happy to help, sir,” he said.

“What can you tell me about the other dealers? I’m not worried about Trino’s guy. He’ll take care of him should his loyalties waver. But what of the other two? Three?” I asked.

Chen looked shocked about my statement about Trino. He looked at Sephie. “You told me the Colombian was a nice guy,” he said.

“He is. Super nice guy. Has a flair for the dramatic, which I greatly appreciate. Just don’t cross him or he’ll use that dramatic flair in ways you don’t want to see,” Sephie said.

Chen cursed under his breath. “Alright then. Gus is Trino’s guy. He’s the one that the other dealers defer to, so he’s kind of in charge of everything. The other three guys are DJ, Smith, and Chucky.”

Ivan and Sephie looked at each other. They both said, “shi t” at the same time. I could see Ivan bristle. Chen was about to pi ss himself.

“Tell me about Chucky. Is he an older guy? Is he a dealer or a pimp?” Ivan asked. His voice had an edge to it, but I could tell he was trying to rein in his intimidation as much as possible.

1 glanced at Sephie, who was clearly worried, her entire body tense. I waited for Chen’s answer before I asked more questions.

“He’s both. He works for Niko. Been working for him for a long time, too. I’m not sure about that guy. The other two dealers are good, as far as I can tell, but I think Chucky might be a little off, if I’m being honest,” Chen said.

“He’s more than a little off,” Sephie said. She looked at me, her anger now clearly visible on her face. She said, in Russian, “he’s the one my uncle called the night of my forced procedure. He was a pimp back then, but he could’ve been my uncle’s dealer and I just didn’t know it. I never stayed around when he came to the house. He looked at me like he wanted me to be one of his girls. He could’ve changed his ways, but I doubt very seriously he has. I wouldn’t trust him. He’s the one who took me and my uncle to the doctor.” She said the last sentence quietly, her gaze dropping to the floor. I was immediately angry. It seemed like she couldn’t escape having to relive her past lately.

“Oh, shi t. You can speak Russian too? Shi t just got so real.” Chen said quietly.

Ivan was also clearly angry. Chucky might not make it out of the apartment tonight. Stephen asked, “what does he look like. Seph? I can happily take care of him before he ever sees you.”

She looked to me, almost like she was asking permission. I nodded my head. Not only did I not want him to even see Sephie, I would never be able to trust him. She looked at Chen. “Does he still keep his hair longer? Like the doll he took his name from?”

“No shi t? He for real named himself after a murderous doll?” Chen asked. “I can’t believe I never pieced that one together, but he totally has the same hair as that fuck ed up doll.”

She asked, in Russian, “do you know what doll I’m talking about, Stephen?”

“Yep. Is his hair red too?” he asked.

“Net. It was black the last time I saw him,” she said. She looked to Chen, asking in English, “is it still black?”

“Yeah, but he’s going gray too. Still same haircut though. Can’t believe I never caught that reference,” Chen said, shaking his

head.

Stephen said, “I’ll take care of him.”

Chapter Two Hundred Twenty-Seven

Adrik

I looked to Chen. “Chucky will not be joining us tonight, but tell me about the other two.”

His eyes went wide. “I mean, I just said he’s a little off. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“No, Chen. I know Chucky. I’ve known Chucky since I was 16. He was friends with my uncle. Chucky is not to be trusted,” Sephie said.

Chen looked at Sephie like he suddenly understood a little more. I didn’t know how much Chen knew about Sephie, but her explanation was all he needed to hear. “If you say he’s not to be trusted, then he’s not to be trusted,” he said. Chen looked at me, saying. “DJ works for Armando. He’s got a girl and two kids. He’s worried about keeping them safe, should the entire city get a hold of brawn. He’s kind of like me. The dealing helps fill in the gaps. He’s got a regular job, but dealing helps him make ends meet. Smith works for Massimo. I think he’s okay, but he’s really quiet. Like serial killer quiet, so I can’t get a good read on him.”

We heard Stephen say, “someone is here.” Ivan stayed with Sephie while Andrei and Viktor moved to the door.

I looked at Chen, confirming, “you told them to come alone?” He nodded his head. “I told them multiple times to come alone. It’s not my fault if they’re too stupid to listen.”

We waited for Stephen to give us more information. “One male, alone. Not Chucky,” he said. Viktor and Andrei stepped outside. closing the door behind them. Misha moved to the door, as backup should they need it. We heard them talking outside the door, then one knock on the door. Misha opened it, revealing one nervous man with Andrei and Viktor.

He walked into the apartment. I looked to Chen, hoping he would address this person. He caught on quickly. “DI. good to see you, man,” he said, walking up to him. They shook hands, then Chen stepped back. Ivan and I were on either side of Sephie. standing just in front of her, mostly shielding her from view. D] looked at us, nervously. I took a step toward him. “DI, thank you for coming,” I said. I stepped back even with Ivan, partially in front of Sephie once more. I felt her hand in mine. I knew she was struggling with the revelation that someone else from her past was involved in this. I laced her fingers through mine, holding her hand firmly. I heard her sigh quietly behind me.

“Next,” Stephen said. We waited to hear more details. “Two, actually,” he said. “Neither is Chucky. Promptness is not his strong suit,” he said.

Viktor and Andrei stepped out once more. Chen looked past me and Ivan to Sephie, “how do they do that? Do they have bionic hearing and can hear when people get here?” he asked.

Sephie laughed. “Something like that,” she said.

Smith and Gus walked into the apartment moments later. I greeted both the same as DJ. Gus looked at Sephie, a small smile on his face. He looked to me, then said, “I mean no disrespect, sir, but Trino has talked very highly of her. I can now see why.”

“Tell Trino I love him, but he still has no chance,” Sephle said, smiling shyly.

Gus laughed loudly. “If you don’t mind, I’ll skip telling him that. But he thinks very highly of you, Sephie.”

She had put her hand in mine once again after I shook hands with Gus and Smith. I squeezed her hand, my thumb tracing circles on hers.

“He’s here. I’ve got a clean shot,” Stephen said. Both Ivan and I looked down at Sephie. She looked up at both of us, the fear was evident on her face.

Ivan said, “take the shot,” in Russian. Silence for a moment, then “done. Guys are moving in to get him out of the way. All clear.”

Sephie quietly said, “thank you.” I looked to Ivan, who understood immediately. He put his arm around her shoulders, pulling her to him as I looked to the three dealers. “Gentlemen, let’s begin,” I said.

“There’s still one other guy, sir. He should be here soon,” Smith said.

“He will not be joining us,” I said firmly. The dealers all looked at Chen, like he had something to do with it. “It was my decision. Chen had nothing to do with it. Chucky was not to be trusted,” I stated, flatly. I did not like to be questioned, but I entertained this one. I needed them to trust me.

“How did you know he couldn’t be trusted? You didn’t even meet him,” Smith said. He was nervous, but he struck me as the type to not back down from a fight, no matter how outgunned he was. His type was useful, given he could control his temper. It was evident that he was not happy with this situation, even without knowing what happened to Chucky yet. His tone was short. A little too short.

I felt Sephie step beside me. Just like she had told me that she could feel my anger before, I could now feel hers even before she was beside me. I didn’t need to look at her to know that she was seething at Smith’s tone. “He didn’t need to meet him. I’ve known Chucky for years. I’m the one that decides who we trust and who we don’t, so if you’re smart, you’ll watch your tone when addressing Ghost because I do not care for it and I’d hate to see you meet the same fate as your pal Chucky.” She had crossed her arms across her chest as she began talking to him. She had taken a few steps closer to him as she noticed him. shrink back slightly, which meant that every single one of us had also taken steps closer to him as she did. It didn’t matter what she did, she knew we were always standing behind her. It gave her confidence. I was proud to see her stand up and fully realize her power. She’d faced demons much worse than this punk and she was becoming aware of just how strong she really was. She knew we would always be with her.

Just to get her point across with an extra exclamation point behind it, I stood directly behind her and stared down Smith until he dropped his gaze. As soon as he did, she simply said, “smart man,” and walked back to stand next to Ivan. She glanced at me. as she turned, her eyes were dark again. Like they were the day she fought Mike. I was thankful for just a brief glimpse of them It was an unexpected turn on the last time I saw her eyes go dark. I didn’t need to deal with that on top of everything else right now.

We all heard Stephen say quietly, “if I wasn’t gay, that probably would’ve been super hot.”

I had to clear my throat to keep from laughing at him. I don’t know how the other guys and Sephie managed to not laugh, but ! didn’t hear a peep out of them.

Gus caught my eye, then glanced quickly to Smith then back to me. He shook his head discreetly. Sephie caught it too. She said quietly, in Russian, “let it play out. I want to know why he doesn’t trust him.”

“Sir, if I may, on behalf of all the dealers we’ve talked with, we want you to know that we’re not down with this plan to replace the city’s supply with brawn. Most of us remember the last time brawn was in the city. I know that the bosses took the credit for stopping it the last time, but it was us. We all refused to sell it, so the bosses had no choice but to stop pushing it. We’re not down with selling it again and we’ll do whatever it takes to make sure it doesn’t happen,” DJ said.

“Tell me what you know of the plot and what you’ve found so far,” I said, looking between all three of them.

Smith was quick to object. “We’ll tell you what we know after you tell us what you know.”

We heard Stephen chuckle. “Ivan, Sephie, take one step to your left. Boss, take one step to your right.” We immediately did as he said. As soon as we were out of the way, a very obvious red dot appeared on Smith’s forehead.

Ivan said, “you talk a big game for someone who’s squarely in the cross hairs.”

Chapter Two Hundred Twenty-Eight

Adrik

Smith looked to Ivan, somewhat confused. Stephen moved the red dot to Smith's chest so he could see it. Ivan pointed to Smith's chest. "You got a little something there…"

Smith looked down, then immediately back up. He was speechless. I knew Stephen would keep his sight on him for the rest of the meeting, just to prove a point.

Gus laughed quietly. "You dumbass," he said, shaking his head. "Sir, we've been scouring the city trying to find where they're making the brawn. I'm sure you know it takes a specific setup to produce, so they can't produce it just anywhere. To get enough to replace the whole city's supply of regular drugs, they're going to need a massive operation. We've found two smaller operations. One in Vito's area of the city, one in Niko's. Neither of those are large enough, in my opinion, to produce enough to fully replace the supply, but they've been running non-stop since we found them. It's possible, I guess, if they've been working at this for a while."

"The one place we're having difficulty getting near is the docks. It's in Sal's area of the city and it's crawling with his men. My guess is they have a larger operation there, but we can't get close enough to confirm that," DJ said.

"You have the exact location of the smaller operations?" I asked.

"Yeah. We've got guys watching it all the time, since we don't know when they're going to try and replace the supply. We're not depending on Sal to give his dealers the heads up. If they start moving their supply, we want to know," Gus said.

"We're going to need the location of those two. The third is at the docks. We've confirmed that one. It is large enough to replace the whole city's supply. The other two are likely backups," I said. "How many dealers do you guys know for sure will help us?"

"There's a couple hundred in the city, at least. I've only talked to like 50, DJ talked to another like 40-50. Chen? How many have you talked to?" Gus asked.

"At least 40, maybe more. I did not realize there would be a test on that later, so I wasn't keeping track. But I've talked to at least 40, Chen said.

"That's most of the city's dealers. You're sure the ones that work for Sal, Niko, and Vito are with you and against selling brawn?" Ivan asked.

"Yeah, no question. Sal's dealers are actually the most angry about this. There's a couple that are happy at the thought of getting paid for a weekend of not selling, but most of them are pissed off that he would try to bring it back. It almost started a war between the dealers and Sal the last time. We might sell drugs, but we're not tryin' to kill nobody. We'll facilitate bad habits, but we have standards on what we sell. Most dealers know the really bad addicts and we purposely rip them off so they don't overdose. The dealers talk between each other in most areas of the city, too. We know who buys from who and I'm not selling to someone who's already bought from another dealer to keep them from overdosing. It's all about making money, but we're also not in the habit of killing our customers. Addicts are mostly misguided people, man," Gus said.

Smith scoffed. "Speak for yourself," he said, under his breath. We all looked to him, expecting an explanation. "Some of us don't have a choice to sell," he said.

"You work for Massimo, right?" Sephie asked. Smith nodded his head. "Does he have something he's holding over you to make you sell for him or does he just force you to sell?" she asked.

"The first. Other dealers that work for him are just forced to sell," Smith said.

"Does Massimo know anything about this plan? About the dealers revolting?" Ivan asked.

"Not that I know of. I haven't seen him in a few weeks, maybe longer. Word is he's in Colombia right now, but nobody knows why and nobody has heard from him since he's been down there." Smith anid. Sephie glanced between me and Ivan. She then glanced at Gus to see if he knew anything. He looked like he might've known something, but we didn't know how much.

I sighed. I needed the dealers once this was all over. I needed them to want to work for me. The fastest route to loyalty was honesty. "Massimo and Dario are in Colombia trying to negotiate a new deal with Trino. They're trying to overthrow me, along with Sal and the other basses."

"Even Armando? I thought you two were close?" DJ asked, completely taken aback.

"No, Mando is good. He's the only boss that stayed loyal to me. The rest of them have their own agenda right now," I said.

DJ was thoughtful for a moment. "This makes everything make so much more sense," he said.

"What do you mean?" Sephie asked.

"The city, by and large, isn't happy right now. It's divided up, right? So, each part of the city has its own boss, except the area around Ghost's building. That's kind of no man's land, if you will, which is why I assume we're meeting here. This is no man's land, but we all consider it to be Ghost's territory. The people here and the people in Armando's area are happy. Like almost obliviously happy. They don't realize there's anything happening in the rest of the city. But in every other area of the city, the people are becoming increasingly unhappy. The people in Sal's area have it the worst right now. They're talking uprising against Sal and his people. They've already gone to the cops to ask for help, but Sal has most of the force on his payroll," DJ said. "It's only a matter of time before the other areas of the city follow suit with Sal's area, if you ask me."

"Why are Sal's people not happy with him? Because of his increase in business taxes?" I asked.

"That's most of it, but crime has increased in his area. Much of that crime is because of his people, too. The guys he has working for him are all thugs and mostly out of control. It doesn't take anything to set one of them off. The people who live in his area have been living in fear for a while now, but they're reaching their limit. They've started fighting back. A couple of his guys got shot a few weeks ago. It's caused a truce. For now. But tension is high in that part of town," DJ said.

"How do you know so much about Sal's part of town when you work for Armando, D[?" Sephie asked.

"I have family in Sal's part of town. I grew up there. I have a big extended family, so they have a good idea what's going on in different areas of the city. We're everywhere, basically, and we really like to talk," DJ said, chuckling.

Sephie looked at me. I already knew what she was thinking. I said, in Russian, "I know. I think your idea of using the people is still a good one. We might not be able to do this as quietly as we thought. It appears the people are aware of more than we originally thought. At least in other areas of the city."

"If nothing else, you can get word that we're taking care of their problem," Viktor said, still in Russian. "If you get rid of all the bosses but one, you're going to need the people to be loyal to you. We can't take on the entire city too. You take care of their problem, they continue to love you."

"It was a good option before, it's still a good option. I'd still like to do this as quietly as possible, but it's looking more and more like that might not be possible," I said.

We were quietly contemplating our options for a moment when Smith asked, "so, are you gonna take the laser sight off me or what?"

Just for emphasis, Stephen moved it to his chest once more. We watched as two more sights showed up beside Stephen's.

Sephie, without cracking a smile, said in Russian, "I can't even begin to tell you how much I love you right now, Yoden."

The great thing about the Russian language is that it's harsh. So, even when you were saying something funny or sentimental, to anyone that didn't speak the language, it still sounded quite severe. Smith was completely convinced that she had just threatened his life once again. He swallowed, hard, and kept his mouth shut. I simply raised my eyebrow at him, looking at him as sternly as I could.

"Tell us where the smaller brawn operations are," Viktor said. He opened a map and laid it out on the kitchen counter.

It was exactly the distraction needed to give me a moment alone with Sephie. I pulled her away from everyone to ask her thoughts on everyone. Truth be told, I also needed to touch her. She knew what I was wanting without me asking her. She stepped close to me, her hand finding mine once again. It was such a habit for me that I reached up and resumed my ongoing battle with the curls around her face as she quietly talked to me in Russian.

"I like DI. A lot. He's very much like Chen. Gus, too. I'm not getting anything bad from those two. Smith, on the other hand, I don't get a good feeling from. I don't think he's necessarily trying to undermine anything, but he doesn't have good reasons to be here. The other two legitimately want to be here. He does not. I can't figure out why he is, but I don't trust him. However, I don't know how to get rid of him at this point either. If he's being forced to sell for Massimo, he could easily be forced to tell him everything about our plan. I don't like it, but I don't think him meeting the same fate as Chucky is necessarily fair, either. I don't think he has a choice in this matter," she said. I could see the concern on her face as she talked. She'd been weighing the options this whole time.

"There's a third option, spider monkey," Andrei said from across the room. He looked like he was speaking to Misha, who was standing next to him. No one had figured out we could all hear each other yet and we liked to keep it that way.

Misha responded, "we just lock him up until this is over. You're right, he may not have a choice in the matter, but he definitely doesn't want to be here. Locking him up is a good solution. He gets to live and we don't have to worry about him betraying us. He goes free once this is over."

"And Massimo is taken care of, so he'll be free of whatever he's got over him," Sephie said. "You're giving this the official approval, my adorable Russian guardian?"

"Da. Officially," Misha said.

She looked to me. She still had a question on her face. Stephen chimed in. "We'll have a team grab him after the meeting. Seph." She looked surprised, not sure how he knew what she was thinking. "What? You're standing right by the window. It was obvious," he said, laughing. "And that's also a question I've had to ask before. I mean, it seems obvious now, but it was not obvious the first time it happened to me either."

Her gorgeous smile spread across her face as she glanced out the window, making the room just a little brighter.

Chapter Two Hundred Twenty-Nine

Adrik

We wrapped up the meeting with Gus, Smith, DJ, and Chen. They gave us all the information we had on the brawn operations they'd found, as well as the surveillance they'd already put in place. Gus and DJ were smart men. They would prove to be useful. Chen, too.

Smith left the meeting first, which was advantageous. Stephen had a team grab him a couple blocks from the apartment building and take him to a safe house. He would stay there, under constant guard until this was all over. I agreed with Sephie that we wouldn't be able to trust him. Before Sephie, I would've just killed him and called it a day. She was right though, it likely wasn't his fault he was caught up in everything if he'd been forced to deal. Now, he would sit this one out and get a second chance once it was over. Or he would get shot if he was dumb enough to try and escape.

Before we left the apartment, I informed the other three what we had decided on Smith. I needed them to trust me, so I made extra effort to be honest with them. It's what had made my relationship so strong with Trino in the beginning. I was as transparent as possible with him and he'd stayed loyal to me, even through the other bosses' attempts to undermine me.

"Smith will no longer be a part of this," I said. Chen's jaw dropped. He looked to Sephie immediately, shocked.

"Please tell me you knew him before too and he wasn't to be trusted either," Chen said.

She laughed quietly. "No, Chen. He's being held until this is over. I don't trust him, but if he's being forced to deal by Massimo, it's not necessarily his fault. He'll go free once this is all over with.

Chen audibly exhaled. Gus laughed at Chen, shaking his head. "You would never last in Colombia, man."

"Which is exactly why I do not live in Colombia," Chen said.

Gus looked to me, a serious look on his face. "I appreciate your discretion, sir. I've had a hard time trusting him since this started. He commands a certain respect from a small group of dealers, but I think it's because they're afraid of him. The rest of us want to be here. I never got the same feeling from him. I think it's better if he's not running anything through this."

"The dealers are very loyal to Gus, sir," DJ said. "He's well-known in his area of the city, too. He's got a good rep with the people."

"I would expect nothing less from one of Trino's guys," I said. Gus simply nodded to me. "I'll be frank with you all. This is likely going to get messy. Very messy. But once the other bosses are taken care of, I'm going to need people I can trust throughout the city. I'm very generous to people who are loyal to me." They all nodded in understanding. "We're going to check on everything you've given us tonight, to see what plans we can come up with. We'll be in touch soon after. If anything changes on your end, let us know. Chen knows how to get in touch with me."

They all shook my hand once more, then took their leave. Once we were alone in the apartment, I looked at Sephie to make sure she didn't have more insight.

"I think those three are going to prove to be very valuable throughout this, as well as after everything calms down. I get the same feeling from them that I did about Trino. Good guys, trying to make good come from not so good activities. It would not surprise me one bit if Gus and DJ had their own businesses they were using the dealing to fund, just like Chen is," she said.

"Does anyone else find it weird that this whole time we've been told it was the bosses that stopped the first wave of brawn years ago, but it was really the dealers?" Andrei asked as we were walking to the elevators in the parking garage.

"I've been wondering about that this whole time. Maybe they were trying to keep me from finding out that Sal is the one that

had it created. The story the whole time has been that the dealers were the ones making it and selling it." I said

"Maybe it was to protect the doctor that made it, so Sal could keep using him," Ivan said.

We heard Stephen's SUV pull into the garage as we waited for the elevator, so we all stored waiting for him to catch up to us outside the elevator. As he walked toward us, Sephie met him hathway. I knew she was still struggling with what had happened earlier that night. Once again something from her past resurfaced, forcing her to face it

He set his bag down on the concrete, opening his arms to her as the got closer to him. She ran the last few steps to him, her arms wrapping around his neck. He held onto her tightly. Everyone still had their earpieces in, so we could hear their

conversation.

"Thank you, Stephen. You're my favorite vampire," she said as he held her.

"Seph, you don't have to be scared of your past anymore. Those people they can't hurt you ever again. We'll make sure of that. You survived it once completely on your own, but you have us now. We will never let another bad thing happen to you," he said.

She was quiet for a moment. I'm positive she was fighting back tears. Finally, she sighed, saying, "squishiest vampire ever." We heard him laugh as he picked her up and hugged her tighter for a moment.

It made me happy to see them so close. It was a long time coming. I had my doubts in the beginning of whether Stephen would ever warm up to her, but it was evident that he loved her just as much as the other guys. Almost as much as me

It was quite late when we finally made it to the penthouse by ourselves. Sephie was sitting on the counter in the bathroom, brushing her teeth. She had taken my shirt almost immediately when we got to the bestroom. I had to admit to loving it when she demanded 1 hand over my shirt when we were finally alone. As much as I hated putting clothes on her instead of taking them off, I did enjoy taking my shirt off and putting it on her for the night.

"So, you know how you said you could feel my anger without having to look at me now?" I said. She looked at me curiously as she jumped down to rinse her mouth out. "I could feel your anger tonight when Smith got a little too short with me. I knew you were seething before you stepped beside me."

Her eyes went wide. "Was it like a living thing that you could feel around you?"

I thought for a moment. "That's a good way to put it. I didn't have a chance to glance at anyone else, but I'm sure it was visible on your face that you were pissed. Except I didn't see you or the guys. I was looking at Smith when I felt it. And then there's the matter of your eyes," I said, smirking at her.

"What are you talking about?" she asked, pulling me into the bedroom.

"It happened that day with Mike. It's the only other time I've seen it and 1, uh, found myself completely turned on by it," I said, climbing into bed so she could lay across my chest. She climbed on top of me instead, her legs straddling me.

"Well now you have to tell me more," she said, a mischievous grin on her face.

I sat up more so I could look at her. "Your eyes go dark, solnishko. Like the green and blue rings disappear and the brown gets dark. Really dark that day with Mike. Not quite as dark tonight, but it was a noticeable change."

She thought for a moment, as her fingers lightly traced over my chest. "I remember you looking at me and being confused at what I saw." She laughed quietly. "I had forgotten about it until now."

"Yeah, uh, super hot," I said. I could feel my cheeks flushing. I wasn't sure she would want to hear how turned on I was in that moment. "I was glad I only caught a glance of it tonight. I didn't need to deal with that on top of everything else."

She put her hands on either side of my face, her gorgeous smile across her face. "I'll try to remember not to look at you the next time I get angry in front of other people," she said, giggling. She leaned down to kiss me, still laughing.

"You laugh, but I'm seriously considering pissing you off when we're alone just to see what happens," I said. She laughed. harder, hiding her face against my shoulder. Her laughter was infectious. I found myself laughing along with her, but I was serious. I really had weighed my options on pissing her off just to see if I could make her eyes go dark again.

She wrapped her arms around my neck, pressing her body against mine. She was still laughing, which I loved. "I just love you so much, Adrik," she said, trying to contain her fits of laughter. I held her close, enjoying the pull in my chest that happened so frequently now when I thought about how much I loved her.

Chapter Two Hundred Thirty

Adrik

The first half of the week went by quickly. It was filled with reports from the smaller brawn operations that Gus's people had found, planning sessions, and endless meetings. By the end of Wednesday, I was very grateful we had spent the previous weekend at the house, away from everyone. I was already looking forward to being able to go back.

I finished up my last meeting of the day, looking forward to finally being done and able to go upstairs to Sephie when Viktor walked in with Armando and Giana. Fuc k. They'd been gone most of the week. He took Giana to his house after her "episode" the week before where she thought Sephie had been an addict. I had to admit to enjoying some time away from them. Mostly her, but Armando was still such a talker that it was nice to have some peace and quiet without him around. Otherwise, he was tolerable. She was still very hit or miss. Mostly miss after her behavior last week.

I was so tired that I was questioning my ability to be diplomatic. I hoped this was going to be short. "Armando, what can I do for you?" I asked. I didn't even bother to address Giana. On purpose. I kind of liked it when she was so nervous she couldn't talk. I was hoping that would happen if I purposely ignored her.

"Boss, I was hoping for a minute to discuss something with you," he said.

I glanced at my watch, then looked back to him. "I only have a few minutes. Talk."

"We had a very long discussion over the weekend, Giana was hoping she could apologize to Sephie, but she also owes you an apology for the way she behaved the last time you saw her," he said. I couldn't help the smirk that I was sure was clear on my face. This felt like such a childish thing to make a grown woman apologize to someone.

"Let me stop you right there, Armando. I still have plenty of respect for you, but I won't accept any kind of forced apology from anyone. If she wants to apologize, then she can come to me on her own. If she wants to apologize to Sephie, which she should. then she should go to her of her own accord. It's entirely up to Sephie on whether she accepts that apology, as well." I looked directly at Giana, finally forced to acknowledge her. "You have no clue what that woman has been through in her short life. You make assumptions about her life based on her extensive knowledge about certain subjects, never considering that she might just be that much smarter than you are. Your insecurity with yourself is no excuse to try and use a falsely perceived fault as a way to bring her down to your level. You have no idea how angry every single one of my men, as well as me, were last week. You hurt her, you deal with us." She had held my gaze until the very last, but then her gaze dropped to the floor. "Sephie has been nothing but nice to you since you've been here. She put herself through torture just to go shopping with you when she was injured. She could barely walk at the end of that day, but she smiled through it to make you feel more comfortable. She's listened as you talk endlessly about ri diculous things because you're nervous. She's protected you from Mike. She facilitated getting you and Mando together. And you turn around and believe she's a former addict because she has extensive knowledge about drugs? Did you ever stop to consider it's because she had to learn how that drug affects its users to survive? No. No, did not. You chose to think the absolute worst of her to make yourself feel better. So, you'll forgive me for not wanting your apology right now. When you can grow up and act like a mature fuck ing woman, then I'll consider it. But not before." I could feel my anger rising to the surface as I talked to Ginna. I'm sure she was terrified. I hoped she was terrified.

you

I heard Viktor's phone ring. He answered it quietly, which meant it was one of the guys. I heard him say, in Russian, "net, he's okay. We'll be up in a minute. Tell her she doesn't need to come down." He ended the call and slipped the phone back in his pocket. He glanced at me, a look of surprise on his face.

Armando looked to Giana, who was staring at the floor, then looked at me. I did feel slightly bad for him. He was in an awkward spot. He inhaled deeply while looking back at Giana stare at the floor. "He's completely right, Giana. You can't expect everyone to cover for you for the rest of your life. Your parents fixed everything when you were younger, but that taught you nothing. You must learn to be your own person now. I told you this would happen," he said. His tone was stern, but soft. I got the impression that he was trying to get her to finally hear his words.

She was likely trying to hold back tears. She couldn't talk, she simply nodded her head, but kept her gaze on the flow. He glanced at me, a look of apology on his face, then guided her toward the door. They were going to have more uncomfortable conversations tonight.

Viktor and I gave them time to get back to their floor before leaving my office. Once we heard the elevator doors close, he said, "Sephie knew you were angry. From upstairs. Ivan had to call me or she would've come running down here." He was clearly stunned at what he'd just told me, but it made me laugh.

"You're going to think we're crazy, but it's been happening regularly for a while now. This is just the first time we haven't been in the same room when it's happened. It's like we can feel each other's anger. I don't know how to explain it. It's not just the anger, either, but that seems to be the strongest one," I said.

Viktor thought for a moment. As we walked to the elevator, he said, "honestly, it makes sense. I've never seen two people so in sync as you two are. She seems to be able to read your mind the best. You also know what she's thinking better than I've ever seen with anyone else. And she's the only one that I've ever seen be able to get your bloodlust to calm down. I almost didn't believe my eyes the first time I saw it happen."

I chuckled. "I tried to tell her, but I'm not sure she fully understands what a feat that is. And she did it without even trying." I said, shaking my head. The doors to the elevator opened. We were still laughing at our conversation when we walked into the penthouse. As soon as Sephie saw me, she ran to me.

"What happened?" she asked, concerned. She was searching my eyes, trying to answer her own question before I had a chance to answer. I glanced to Viktor to make sure he was watching. I wanted them to see this. I looked back at her and let her search my eyes without saying a word. She let out a small gasp. "Giana tried to apologize but you made her cry, didn't you?"

I smiled down at her, then glanced back to Viktor. His mo uth was open in shock. I glanced quickly at the other four guys looked just as surprised. "To be fair, I didn't see her crying. She wouldn't look at me at the end there," I said, smirking.

"She was crying," Viktor said. He was still completely shocked at what he'd just witnessed.

"Da mmit, I miss all the fun!" Misha said.

"Sephie, how did you know he was angry from up here? I mean, you were right. He was hot, but how did you know?" Viktor asked.

"You felt it, didn't you?" I asked her, before she could answer. She grinned at me, nodding her head. I looked at Viktor, saying. "told you. I don't know how it works, but it does."

The other guys were now curious. "She felt what? She can feel when you're angry now?" Andrei asked.

She turned back toward the kitchen, grabbing my hand and pulling me with her. "Yeah, that's the only way I know to describe it. It's happened a few times now, but we've never not been in the same room before. This one was different," she said as she went back to finishing dinner.

"Does it only happen with anger, or can you feel other emotions too?" Stephen asked.

I looked at Sephie, who was thinking. I knew she likely didn't want to get too detailed on our s ex life, but the truth was it was happening with other emotions too, especially when we had s ex. It felt like it was getting more intense every time. I think she's been feeling it longer than I have, but I'm finally feeling what she feels. She glanced up to see me looking at her. She couldn't hide the smirk on her face. I knew she wasn't going to answer, either. I looked to Stephen, saying, "the anger seems to be the strongest and therefore the easiest one to feel, but it's happening with other emotions as well."

"How long has she straight up been reading your mind?" Misha asked.

Chapter Two Hundred Thirty-One

Adrik

I laughed. “That one has been happening for a while. But that shouldn’t surprise any of you. She does it to you guys too,” I said.

“Not like what she just did to you. Although, I’d be willing to het she probably could do it to one of us If we tried it,” Misha said.

“I don’t know. It works the best with Adrik. He’s the only one I know for sure. The rest of you is usually my best guess,” Sephie said.

“Christmas isn’t that far away. What size crystal ball were you thinking you’ll need to get this side hustle off the ground?” Ivan asked, causing Sephie to grin at him.

“It does make sense that you two would be so completely in sync. I’ve never seen two people as connected as you two are. It makes sense that you two feel what the other one feels, but not even being in the same room is pretty impressive,” Stephen said. Out of all the guys, he was the most scientifically minded, especially when it came to psychology and matters of the mind. I’m sure he was constructing an experiment to carry out to prove that what he’d just seen was real.

“Surely you’ve seen something similar in your 900 years on this earth?” Andrei asked Stephen.

“Once before,” Stephen said, completely straight-faced. We all laughed. Sephie had set out the food on the island as we were talking and laughing. She walked to me as the guys helped themselves to food, tucking herself into my side where she fit so perfectly. I looked down at her, reveling in her smile.

“This is exactly what I needed, solnishko,” I said, brushing a curl from her face. She just smiled her sweet smile and stood on her toes to kiss me. Suddenly the stress from the day was completely gone.

“So, tell us what happened with Giana,” Misha said after we had all started eating.

Viktor couldn’t hide his amusement. “You missed a good one, Misha. You would’ve been so happy, especially after you were so angry last week,” he said.

Misha looked at me, clearly still angry as he thought about Giana’s behavior last week. “I hope you made her feel terrible.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “I don’t know if she actually heard anything I said, that’s the issue. It seemed like Armando had said the same thing to her over and over and she’s still not hearing it. He was almost trying to force an apology out of her, like she was a child. I question whether she’s really heard anything that’s been said to her if she can’t even apologize on her own,” I said.

“Thankfully, Boss didn’t accept it. Honestly, I was shocked that Armando did it,” Viktor said.

“I do feel bad for Mando. He’s in an awkward spot with this one,” I said.

“What did you say to her?” Sephie asked.

“I told her she should come and apologize on her own, first and foremost. Then I think I told her you were smarter than she was and that her insecurity with herself was no excuse to try and use a falsely perceived fault to tear you down to make herself feel better. Then I listed everything you’ve done for her since she’s been here and tried to make her feel bad for thinking the worst of you. I also might’ve thrown in a veiled threat about how angry we all were with her last week,” I said that last sentence quietly. I wasn’t sure how happy Sephie was going to be with that one. Misha, on the other hand, was ecstatic.

“Oh, please tell me you told her how angry I was last week. She can’t keep from staring at me. Like literally all the time. I hope it crushes her to know I was pi ssed,” he said.

“Not just you, Misha. I told her all of us were angry with her,” I said.

“He told her that if she hurts Sephie, she deals with us,” Viktor said.

Misha threw his fists in the air, “YES! Please tell me she was scared.”

“Serves her right,” Ivan said. “Sometimes you have to learn lessons the hard way. This is definitely one of those times for her.”

“I think Sephie was right about her leading a sheltered life up until recently. Armando made a comment about her parents fixing everything for her but teaching her nothing or something like that after Boss ripped her a new one,” Viktor said.

“So, her parents have been covering for her?” Sephie asked,

“That’s what he made it seem like, but I don’t know anything else about it,” Viktor said. “This kind of has spoiled rich kid vibes, don’t you think?”

Sephie was quiet for a moment. I could tell she was thinking about things; she chewed on her bottom lip, lost in thought. “Ok, so who here thinks she’s going to want to go back to Italy in the next week?” she asked, a devilish grin on her face.

Four of us raised our hands. Stephen, one of the ones that didn’t raise his hand, said, “I think she’ll try, but I think this is the pivotal moment where Armando forces her to grow up. I don’t think he’ll let her go back to Italy right now. Not without him and I don’t think he’s du mb enough to think it’s a good idea to leave the city right now.”

“We’re adding this to the wh ite board in the morning.” Andrei said.

Sephie was still lost in thought as we cleaned the kitchen up from dinner. We’d settled into a routine where she would cook, with the help of whoever was around to help her, but we all pitched in to clean up after, so she didn’t have to. The guys would happily wash dishes if it meant she cooked more. Viktor still hadn’t even advertised that we needed a chef. At this point, I was convinced he wasn’t going to until Sephie told him she was tired of cooking.

We would order takeout regularly, just to give her a break. I didn’t want her to feel like she had to cook. Only when she wanted. to. We were just incredibly lucky that she wanted to cook more often than not.

She was still sitting at the island in the kitchen, lost in thought, as we cleaned up and kept chatting about everything going on. Ivan noticed her blank expression before I did. He called her name to try to get her attention, but she didn’t respond. The other guys noticed she didn’t respond right away too, so we all stopped. Ivan walked to her, placing his large hand on her shoulder.

“Princess?” he asked. As soon as she felt his hand on her, she looked up at him. She was almost surprised that he was standing next to her.

“Sh it. I did it again,” she said. He chuckled at her as he slid his arm around her shoulders.

“Tell me what’s going on, princess,” he said quietly. I stood and watched this giant bear of a man that could strike fear into any person he chose to be gentle and soft with her. I had never seen him be this way until Sephie. I didn’t know it was possible. He generally never liked being touched and from what little I know about his past, with good reason. She knew he needed it the most, I think. Ivan had very thick walls, but they were no match for Sephie. She knocked them down faster than I thought possible.

Chapter Two Hundred Thirty-Two

Adrik

He pulled a chair up next to her, his hand still on her shoulder. He was trying to keep her here. The rest of the guys quietly went back to what they were doing, trying to give them as much privacy as they could, but I was sure they were all eavesdropping as much as possible. She sighed, looking up at him. She glanced at me as well, then back to Ivan. “I was thinking about everything that’s happened the last week or so. Mostly about the Glana thing I feel like it’s my fault, somehow. Like I should’ve been nicer to her and this wouldn’t have happened. Then I started to think about Chucky and my mind went blank and you were standing next to me,” she said.

While the guys had tried to appear busy when she started talking, they were now blatantly listening to what she was telling Ivan. It made me smile that they were all so concerned about her.

“Your mind is going blank, Seph?” Stephen asked her.

She nodded her head. “I didn’t know I was doing it until Adrik pointed it out.”

“Does it happen often?” Andrei asked. He gave Stephen a knowing look, which surprised me.

“She’s done it a few times since Mike. It’s been a few days since it happened last, I think. It didn’t happen at all when we were at the house, did it?” Ivan asked, looking at me.

“No, I didn’t catch her doing it at all when we were there,” I said. I looked at Stephen, asking. “do you have more insight into why she’s doing it or what we can do to help her? It seems that talking about things helps her not do it for a while.”

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In his usual calm, serious manner, he thought for a few minutes. While he was thinking, Andrei said, “it’s happened to me before. After a bad concussion. Sephie’s had at least two bad concussions fairly recently. It eventually went away for me, took a while. I think her brain is still healing. It doesn’t help that she has to deal with everything else on top of it.”

Ivan looked at me, then back at Sephie. “Maybe the acupuncture will help again. It helped before. You might need it again.”

Sephie looked at me, silently asking my thoughts. She still wasn’t used to believing that she could do whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted. She still felt like she needed permission. I found it amusing, but very endearing. I smiled at her, trying to tell her that she didn’t need my permission. She looked back to Ivan. “I think I still have her card somewhere. It did help me feel better last time.”

“I’ve got her number, I’ve been going to her for years,” Ivan said, a smirk on his face. She raised an eyebrow at him. “What? It’s not like I can feel when something is screwed up. Sometimes I need an outside opinion,” he said. Sephie laughed, leaning over, and resting her head on his shoulder.

“Did this ever happen before to you, Seph?” Stephen asked.

“I think so. I would lose time after that night in the basement with my uncle for a while after I got away from him. It mostly happened when I was alone, so I’m not sure if it’s the same thing. I’m not exactly aware when it’s happening, but I would realize that the movie was over and I had no recollection of anything that happened. Things like that,” she said.

“Any idea how long it lasted after you got away from him?” Andrel asked.

“I don’t really remember. How long was it for you?” she asked.

“I think It lasted around six months for me, but it was a nasty concussion,” he said.

How did you get it?” she asked.

“Car accident. My buddy was a little too drunk. He swerved to avoid an animal in the road, lost control and hit a tree. I got thrown through the windshield,” he said.

I glanced at Sephie, who’s eyes were wide in shock. I never knew about this story, either. “When did this happen?” I asked.

“Just after high school. I was a sh it in school. Always did what I wasn’t supposed to do. My friend was worse. It was good though. The accident was the wake up call I needed,” Andrei said,

“What happened to your friend?” Misha asked.

“He walked away from the accident. You know how they always say the drunk people survive the accidents? It was true in this case. He had a couple of bumps and scrapes, but they had to life-flight me to the hospital. They thought I was going to d ie. I haven’t touched alcohol since that accident. I don’t think my friend can say the same. Last I heard, he was spiraling out of control. He couldn’t deal with the guilt,” Andrei said.

I felt Sephie’s eyes on me. I knew she was connecting something, but wasn’t sure what just yet. She looked to Ivan with the same look on her face before she looked back to Andrei. “Bubba, were you unconscious when you were in the hospital for the first however long?”

He nodded. “I think I was out for four days.”

That’s what she was connecting. I caught Ivan’s eye as he realized where she was going with this as well.

“Do you have any memories of when you were out?” she asked. There was a flash of immediate recognition on his face, but he looked like he was uncomfortable talking about it. She quietly got up and went to him. “You don’t have to talk about it, Bubba. But I have a feeling I know exactly what you remember,” she said as she put his giant arm around her shoulders so she could hold onto his waist. He looked down at her, curious. “Was it like swimming in the nothing? Like you could see your own body but nothing else?” she asked.

Andrei’s eyes went wide. “How did you know that? Did you just do that mind reading thing to me? Get out of my head!” he said as he put his hand over her eyes.

She laughed, taking his hand from her eyes. “No, Bubba. It happened to me too. When I was on the plane, that’s what was happening. Adrik’s voice pulled me out of my nightmare and pulled me there. His voice is eventually what helped me find my way out.”

“That’s what happened when I was at the hospital. Sephie’s voice pulled me there out of my nightmare where I’m trying to ki ll the doctor that experimented on me when I was a kid,” Ivan said.

“That’s what happened when I was a kid the first time someone tried to get to my father through me. My father’s voice is what pulled me out of it,” I said.

Sephie laughed softly at the shocked expression on Andrei’s face. She then looked to Misha, Stephen, and Viktor. “Have you three had similar experiences too?”

They all had equally shocked expressions on their faces, but they just nodded their heads. Sephie smiled, looking at me. “That’s why we’re all here together. We’ve always been connected.”

Chapter Two Hundred Thirty-Three

Sephie

“I just never thought the darkness is what would connect us,” I said, mostly to myself. I had walked back to sit next to Ivan, so he heard me. My mind was racing trying to understand what we’d just discovered. I knew we were all connected in some way, but I didn’t expect it to be the same, somewhat otherworldly experience.

“Doesn’t that happen to everyone?” Misha asked. He was clearly still surprised at finding out we’d all been in the same “place” within our heads when seriously injured. For some reason, we all looked at Stephen. If anyone had the answer to that question, it had to be him.

He looked surprised at everyone looking at him. “I have a lot of answers to a lot of questions, but that question is not one of the ones I have an answer to. I’ve never heard of this many people essentially sharing an experience. In all my 900 years,” he said. I had no idea how he managed to keep a straight face all the time, but I found myself admiring him for it. It was impressive.

We were all quiet for a few minutes, everyone’s mind racing, trying to comprehend our conversation. Andrei leaned onto his elbows on the counter. He was staring at his hands. “We’re all evil, aren’t we?” he asked.

I think he meant it as a joke, but I could also hear the legitimate worry in his voice. “Bubbá…” I said.

-Ivan interrupted me before I could say any more. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I enjoy it when I’m in the darkness

It’s difficult to leave it sometimes. I’m arguably the most evil out of all of us, so you might be on to something there, Andrei.”

I hooked my arm through his and leaned my head against his shoulder. “I don’t think any of us are evil. And I think you enjoy the darkness because you know nothing can hurt you there. You’ve found peace in your darkness, both literally and figuratively. You and Adrik both. You’re both fine with the fact that you might be a little evil. You understand that people can be both. Most people are both. The world is both. The point of life is to find the balance between the two.” Ivan squeezed my arm that was still hooked through his. “Mine was necessary to remind me of something important,” I said. I was finally starting to understand why things had happened the way they had. “You all know how much I hate being cold. My darkness is cold. Like bone-chilling cold. At first, I couldn’t see anything at all, not even my own body. I started to hear Adrik’s voice and I could faintly see the outline of my body, but nothing beyond it. That’s also when I started to hear my uncle’s voice. Every time I would hear his voice, it would get darker. When I would hear Adrik, the opposite. It would get lighter. Eventually, it started to get warmer too. You all heard my fight with my uncle. Once I finally kicked him out of my head, I could see. I needed that reminder that my light comes from me. Adrik was the spark to make me remember.” I glanced over at Adrik. I’d never explained what had happened when I was stuck in the nightmare loop to him before now. I don’t think he realized how much of an effect he had on me when I was trapped in my own mind.

“That’s similar to how it happened for me when I was in the hospital. Every time I’m in the hospital, I see the same doctor’s face that used to delight in torturing me when I was a kid. I’m trying to kill him when I fight whoever is in front of me. It doesn’t matter who the person is, I can’t see them. I can only see the doctor,” Ivan said.

“But you see Sephie. She’s the only one you don’t fight,” Viktor said. Ivan looked down at me. We knew why he could see me when he couldn’t see anybody else. I could see it clearly on his face that he didn’t want to share that information with everyone, just as I didn’t want to share it either.

“The only thing we can figure out is their shared hatred of doctors. Like Sephie said, their demons recognize each other, if you will,” Adrik said. I glanced at him, thankful for stepping in so we didn’t need to elaborate. I glanced around to see if the rest of the guys were looking at us. When I was satisfied they weren’t, I signed a “thank you” to Adrik.

“Bubba, how did you get out of your darkness after your accident?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I just woke up. I don’t remember specifics about it. I remember being in it and only able to see my body, but I don’t have memories of any sounds. I just woke up in the hospital a few days later. It took me a little bit to remember what had happened after I woke up,” Andrei said.

“That’s how it was for me, too,” Viktor said. “I have a memory of being in it, but nothing further.”

“And you just woke up out of yours, too?” I asked. He nodded.

“Same for me,” Misha said.

“Me too,” Stephen said.

“Interesting,” I said. I remembered my dad telling me that Ivan could walk between worlds and that I could too. It felt lik had something to do with the difference between our experiences and the other guys’ experiences, but | sn’t sure how. I was sure, however, that it was one more way we were all connected. It wasn’t by chance that they all found each other, and by chance that they found me.

The next afternoon, I was in Adrik’s office while he finished up work. I had a book, stretched out on the couch. I could see Adrik peek at me now and then while he was working. He loved it when his schedule was clear and I would come to his office while he worked, just so he could be near me. I had to admit to loving it as well. I always worried I was going to distract insisted that I was the best distraction there was, whether I was there or not. He admitted to his mind wandering more when I wasn’t there and he couldn’t see me.

Andy stuck his head in the office door, knocking on the door frame lightly. We both looked toward the door. “Do you have minutes, Boss?” Adrik nodded his head, then glanced at me as Andy walked into the office. Adrik was surprised to see him which meant he was unsure of what was about to come out of Andy’s mouth. I understood his look and quietly got up from couch, taking my usual spot behind Adrik’s desk so I could see Andy as he talked to Adrik.

the office

Adrik stayed quiet, as usual, Andy sat across from Adrik’s desk. He looked a little nervous, but the last time be had been intense for him. “I was hoping to discuss something with you, sir. I’m not 100% sure on it yet, but I’ve also run in somewhat of a dead end on it now. I think it’s important enough that you know.”

I was now curious what he was going to tell us. I could feel Adrik’s anger start to rise. He hated surprises. Andy glanced at Adrik, then to me. He took a deep breath and continued, “I overheard Mike on the phone a few times. Once the night they got me out, once after I was moved here. I don’t know for sure who he was talking to, but he used a code that I’ve heard Anthony use for years.”

I stood up and grabbed Adrik’s phone from his desk, calling Viktor. I let it ring, then ended the call. They were all in the office within seconds. Andy went pale when they all walked in. “Don’t worry, Andy. I just want them to hear this as well. Tell the what you just told us.” He looked at the guys, who were still standing, and repeated what he’d just told us. He was still nervous, but he was trying to keep himself composed.

“What’s the code?” Ivan asked.

“It’s one word. Anthony got it from an old movie when he was younger and he’s been obsessed with it ever since. He always wanted to be the stereotypical gangster you see in movies. He has all his guys call him sicario’ when they talk to him,” Andy said.

I felt like I’d been punched in the stomach. I stumbled backward toward the cabinet to catch myself. I was immediately back in the ring with Mike, right before I kicked him the last time.

“Do you want to adjust your opinion of me yet?

“Fuck you, whore.”

Then that last word he said to me. The one I almost didn’t hear. “Sicario.”

My mind was racing. Why would he say that? Why would he basically be telling me he was working for Anthony? Why would Andy be telling us this now? Why not earlier? Was Andy also working for Anthony? I felt my anger rising to the surface as I tried to make sense of who we could trust and who we couldn’t.

I didn’t hear Adrik get up from his chair. I was snapped back to reality when I felt his arm around my waist. I looked up at hin He was clearly concerned. “Are you okay? What’s going on? Talk to me.” I glanced quickly at Andy, who was still nervous, but appeared to be concerned as well. The guys were all still standing, but they’d moved to surround Andy.

I responded in Russian. I wasn’t sure we could trust Andy at this point, and it was making me angry. “That’s the last word he said to me in the ring. I doubt any of you heard it. I almost didn’t hear it because he was having trouble talking and he mumbled it. I didn’t think anything of it at the time. I thought he was calling me a hitman.”

“Why would he call you a hitman, gazelle?” Misha asked, still in Russian.

“That’s what that word means, my adorable Russian guardian. I didn’t think anything of it then. But why would Andy be tellin us this now? Why not earlier? Why does he sit on this information before telling us?” I asked. Adrik’s anger was also starting rise to the surface, but he was running his hand over my back, trying to keep himself calm.

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Ivan, who was also clearly angry, looked to Andy, asking in English, “why are you just telling us this now?” He might’ve had a threatening edge to his voice that may have made Andy clench a little

Chapter Two Hundred Thirty-Four

Sephie

“I was trying to catch Mike talking to Anthony again so I could confirm it, but I haven’t seen him around for a few days. I know Armando was gone over the weekend, so I figured he was with them, but I haven’t seen Mike since they got back. I’m worried he went back to Anthony. And if I’m being honest, you guys always seem like you want to ki ll me anytime I give you Information,” Andy said, running his hand through his hair.

“And yet, you’re still alive. It’s like magic, really.” I said, crossing my arms across my chest. “Don’t be a pu ssy, Andy. You’ve been in this world long enough, for fu ck’s sake. They saved your a ss, gave you a safe place to live, and everything you need. If they wanted to ki ll you, you would’ve been dead a long time ago. Cut the bu llshit.”

Adrik cleared his throat quietly beside me and I knew it was because he was trying not to laugh. I felt his hand slip under my shirt, his thumb tracing circles on the bare skin of my back.

Andy looked to me, surprised at my words. He thought for a moment. Ivan was losing patience and said, “you realize if she’s losing patience with you that mine was gone before I even walked into the office. It’s in your best interest that you start talking.”

Andy started to say something, then stopped himself. He took a deep breath, then said. “I was trying to work it into a job here. Either with your security or Armando’s. I knew if I could catch Mike working for Anthony, it would look good for me and you’d be more willing to trust me, so I waited to try and get hard proof, But then I haven’t seen him for a few days, so I got worried.”

I looked at Viktor to gauge his reaction. The look on his face said he was not the least bit interested in hiring Andy at this moment. He said, in Russian, “he’s not working for us. I can talk to Armando and see if he wants him.”

“Only after all this is over. Not before,” Adrik said. Viktor nodded his head in agreement. Adrik glanced down at me, like he was asking my opinion on it as well.

“I don’t trust him. It was shaky at best before this, but this would’ve been good information to have weeks ago,” I said.

Adrik looked at Andy. In English, he said, “next time you have information that directly affects us, you tell us right away. We’ll consider the job after all this is over. Until then, nothing changes,” I could feel Adrik’s anger, but I could also feel that he was trying to contain it. It was almost like I could feel him struggling against it. Each time it happened, I could feel more than the time before. It felt almost like I could feel what he was feeling in his body and it was mirrored in mine.

Andy nodded and took his leave quickly. As we watched him walk out of the office, I turned toward Adrik, putting my hands on his chest. I could feel his anger fade away as he looked at me. I felt the calm return as he wrapped his arms around my waist. I smiled up at him. “That was different,” I said.

He leaned down and kissed me quickly. “We’ll talk about it later,” he said, winking at me. He pulled me with him to his chair. Viktor had followed Andy to the door, closing it behind him as he left. Andy had his own guards assigned to make sure he didn’t leave the building without permission, so there was no need to follow him any farther. Everyone moved to find a place to sit. Adrik pulled me into his lap as he sat back at his desk.

We all sat in silence for a few minutes, trying to wrap our heads around this new bit of information. I was frustrated with how difficult it was becoming to know who we could trust and who we couldn’t trust through all this.

“Do you think this means that Keith and Chris are in question as well?” I asked.

“It’s worth having a very serious conversation with both of them to find out,” Ivan said.

“Call one of them up here. I want to get to the bottom of this right away, but I want to talk to them separately,” Adrik said. While he had a moment of calm, I could feel his anger rising again. I could also feel that he wasn’t fighting it this time. He wanted to be angry to talk to Chris and Keith.

If I’d learned anything since being with Adrik, it was that anger was a very useful emotion once you learned to control it. Especially if you needed to intimidate someone into telling you the truth. I smiled to myself. While I usually tried to keep him calm, I found myself enjoying being able to feel his anger because I knew it was needed.

We heard a knock on Adrik’s office door. Viktor opened the door, letting Keith into the office. He walked in, somewhat curious as to what was going on, but he seemed quite calm. “What’s going on?” he asked as he sat across from Adrik’s desk.

“We need to know everything you know about Mike,” Ivan said. He was still clearly angry, which caught Keith off guard.

“Yeah, man. Can I ask why? Seems kind of like a moot point now,” Keith said.

“Did I ask for your opinion?” Ivan asked, a clear edge to his voice,

Keith looked quickly to Stephen. It was obvious that he was confused by what was happening. “I’ll tell you anything you want to know, but I kind of need a direction here. Why are you asking about him? Like what are you looking for?”

While the guys were all quickly becoming angrier because it felt like Keith was trying to avoid the question, I could see that he was being honest and was trying to figure out how to appease them. “Let’s start with when he left the police force in the small town you guys grew up in. Did he leave before or after you left the town?” I asked.

“He left before I did. He was gone for a couple years before I decided to leave. Honestly, we lost touch until we both showed up for this job. I didn’t really like him when we worked together before, so I wasn’t exactly jumping at the chance to catch up with him,” he said. He looked at Stephen again, this time it was obvious that he was unsure how much he could say.

“He didn’t know you’re g ay?” I asked. Keith turned back to me, his eyes wide.

Stephen chuckled. “They know, Keith.”

“Oh. Okay. Well, no. He didn’t know. He was not as observant as you.” He cleared his throat. “Clearly.”

The guys couldn’t help but laugh quietly. I’m sure they would’v given him a hard time if this conversation was a little more light hearted

“Did he ever say anything about what he’d been doing in the couple years between him leaving and getting this job?” I asked.

“Not much. He said he’d worked security here and there. Mostly odd jobs. He tried to get onto the police force in the city, but he failed the psych test,” Keith said. “He never really went into details, but I also never really asked. I almost didn’t take this job. because of him, if I’m being honest. It was so much better after he left,” he said.

“Why did you leave then?” Misha asked.

“Basically, the same reason that Mike left. It was such a small town that there was no room for advancement. I’d pretty much topped out early on in my career. There, uh, also wasn’t much of a dating scene in town. I knew Mike had initially moved to the city, but like I said, we lost touch, so I never dreamed I would meet him at the first job I applied to after moving here,” Keith

said.

“How long were you here before you applied for this job?” I asked.

“A week. This was the first jub 1 applied for, too. I’m pretty sure I got lucky, but this conversation is making me wonder, not

gonna lie,” he said.

“You’re doing fine, Keith. Just relax,” I said. He gave me a tight smile, but did not relax.

“After you two started, did you ever notice him making calls that he wouldn’t tell you about or did he ever disappear with no explanation? Did you notice anything weird?” Viktor asked.

Keith thought for a moment. “A couple of hushed phone calls. Or like he would end the call very quickly if he saw me. I never noticed him disappear, but once Armando was done for the day, I didn’t keep track of Mike. I was usually looking forward to getting a break from him by the end of the day, so I didn’t pay attention to what he was doing or not doing.”

“Do you remember when those phone calls happened?” Viktor asked.

“Not precisely, no,” Keith said. “Can I ask why this is important now? I mean, he’s not really an issue now, right?”

The guys looked to me before saying anything further. I said, in Russian, “I don’t think he’s lying. I don’t think he knows anything. I think he likely stayed away from him as much as possible. If Mike had that much of an issue with me, I can only imagine how horrific he would’ve been toward Keith if he found out. He’s nervous because we’re all here grilling

im, but I

don’t feel like he’s hiding anything.”

While we were talking with Keith, I knew Adrik had been staring him down. It was a very effective strategy for him, as he could be extremely intimidating when he wanted to be. I saw Keith catch his gaze once or twice and immediately regret it. Once I told them that he was telling the truth, I felt Adrik relax slightly. His anger level lowering, but only slightly.

Chapter Two Hundred Thirty-Five

Sephle

“We have reason to believe that Mike was working for Anthony,” Adrik said. “We needed to make sure he’s the only one.”

Keith looked stunned. He looked at the floor for a moment. “Now it makes sense.”

“What makes sense?” Ivan asked. Where he had started to calm down, he was now right back to the anger level he was at when Keith walked in.

“A couple of things, actually. I was with Mike when we went in to get Andy. There was clear recognition between those two when Andy first saw us. I admit I don’t have extensive experience with those types of situations, but I did enough work with informants that I recognize the look when you know someone but you’re trying to act like you don’t know someone. Andy had seen Mike before, but I’m sure Mike gave him a look when he said the code word you gave us,” he said.

Adrik, who had also started to relax, was no longer relaxed. I could feel his anger, which was feeding into my anger. I stood, knowing he would want to pace. “He’s a dead man,” Adrik said quietly, but dripping with anger, as he stood up.

Keith’s eyes went wide once again. “Tell us what else makes sense, Keith,” I said, giving him a tight smile. The scene in front of him did not help him to calm down. I’m sure my anger was written all over my face, as Adrik paced behind me like a raged animal just waiting for his chance to escape.

He looked too stunned to speak for a moment. His mouth was open, but his brain had clicked off as he just stared at Adrik. “KEITH,” Stephen said, firmly enough that it snapped him back to reality.

“Right. Uh, when we went to get the documents from Armando’s house. When we got back and Mike said that no one was watching us or following us? Yeah, he was lying. I don’t think Armando caught it, but both Chris and I noticed we were being followed. Mike was basically in charge and I knew how he was about being questioned, so I didn’t say anything. I should’ve said something.” He looked up, his eyes even wider than before. “It was a mistake. It will never happen again,” he pleaded. He was in genuine fear for his life at this point.

“Anything else? Now would be the ideal time to come clean with everything, Keith,” I said.

He swallowed hard, but shook his head no. “That’s everything I can remember. Just those two instances. I didn’t notice anybody when we went to pick Andy up and bring him here and I haven’t noticed anything since. Why wouldn’t they be following us now that Mike is gone?” he asked.

It dawned on me the same time it dawned on Ivan. He caught my eye and we both said “Andy” at the same time. They didn’t need to follow anyone when they had someone on the inside. I felt my level of anger rise higher than I’d ever felt it. I vouched for that son of a bitch. I gave him the okay. I ran interference for him when the guys wanted to pummel him on multiple occasions. He tried to kill Ivan. That motherfucker.

I felt Adrik’s arm slide around my waist. He leaned down so his lips were next to my ear. “Take a breath, solnishko. We need to be smart about this. I want to talk to Chris first before we deal with Andy.” I looked up at him, somewhat surprised that he was the one calming me down. I immediately recognized the lust in his eyes when he looked down at me. I shut my eyes, trying to get control of myself and to keep him from thinking about ripping my clothes off. When I opened them, I looked at him again. I raised my eyebrow slightly, silently asking if my eyes were normal again. He just smirked at me and kissed my temple. “Normal again,” he said quietly.

Adrik looked to Viktor. “Call Chris. Put him in a room until we’re done with Chris.”

Viktor walked Keith out of the office. A few minutes later, he returned with Chris, who was already so nervous he could barely

keep it together.

“Tell us what happened the night you guys went to get Andy,” Ivan said in his very authoritative tone.

“Keith probably knows more than I do. I wasn’t with him and Mike when they actually went in to get Andy. I stayed outside, in the hall, to make sure no one surprised us. I didn’t hear anything, other than Mike tell Andy the code word you guys gave us, then they came back out. You guys know what happened on the way out of the building, right?” he asked.

“What about what happened the night you went to Armando’s house to get the documents?” Viktor asked. Even he sounded

angry.

“Oh shit. Well, Mike lied to you guys, for one. I don’t know why. I think he was trying to save face, but we were followed. He told you guys we weren’t,” he said.

“Did you notice anything weird with Mike other than that instance?” I asked. I was trying to keep my cool, but I was certain I was failing miserably at it, as Adrik pulled me closer to him. I felt his hand slide under my shirt, his thumb on my skin.

“Honestly, I tried to stay away from him as much as possible. He was a dick.”

“And you didn’t feel it was important to tell us that he lied to us?” I asked, maybe a little louder than I meant

“Please don’t hurt me. He made it clear that he was in charge. He also made it clear that he could fire me and Keith at will. I need this job, even though it might cost me my life in like two minutes,” he said.

Adrik flexed his arm around my waist, causing me to look at him. He wanted to know my opinion of Chris before he said anything. “I don’t think he’s lying, but I also vouched for that piece of shit Andy, too, so I don’t know how much you want to trust me right now,” I responded in Russian.

Adrik clicked his tongue at me, but said nothing. He turned to Chris, saying, “Mike was working for Anthony. If we find out you or Keith are also working for anyone else, you’ll meet the same fate as Mike. Only it won’t be so quick.” He looked at Chris with every ounce of hatred he could muster.

“I’m not working for anyone else, I swear. Look, I really need this job. I wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize it. My mom, she’s sick. This job is paying her medical bills. She raised me and my sister on her own, working 2-3 jobs. She means the world to me. There’s no way I would put her or being able to take care of her in danger,” Chris said. His emotions were right on the surface when he talked about his mother, making me want to believe him, but I was so frustrated with myself for believing Andy that I wasn’t sure I should believe Chris.

I closed my eyes, pinching the bridge of my nose. My head was starting to pound. I heard Adrik tell Viktor quietly to put Chris in a room as well. I opened my eyes and looked at Adrik, who was clearly concerned about me. When his eyes met mine, he looked surprised. “Blink, love,” he whispered, his sexy smirk on his face.

“Shit, sorry,” I said, closing my eyes once more. I took a deep breath, trying to calm down. I was almost afraid to open my eyes again. When I did, I looked quickly to Adrik, who smiled at me.

“Normal again,” he said, kissing my forehead. He stepped in front of me, glancing at the guys. “Apologies, but I need to do this,” he said to them as he wrapped his arm tightly around my waist. He pulled me against him firmly, his lips finding mine forcefully. His anger quickly turned to passion as he kissed me deeply. I felt my knees go weak. I wrapped my arms around his neck, pressing my body to his even tighter. Just when I felt my lungs objecting to the lack of air, he stopped the kiss, his forehead pressed to mine as he regained control. He pressed his lips to mine gently once more then pulled me to one of the couches to sit. Usually, kissing me like that would calm him down, but I felt like he did that for me this time. It was effective. I found myself wanting more, no longer so angry I was having trouble seeing.

“I picked the worst person to be wrong about, it seems,” I said, as I felt Adrik’s arms slide around me.

“We don’t know for sure you were wrong yet, spider monkey. He could still be telling us the truth, just maybe not the whole truth. That seems to be what he does,” Andrei said.

“Not telling us that he knew Mike before was a big fucking omission,” I said. “Just like not telling us that Sal was the one behind brawn all along was a big fucking omission.”

“Maybe he’s trying to play both sides,” Ivan said. “Essentially, that’s what he’s always done. He worked for Sal, but fed you information. The big question is whether he’s feeding Sal information while he’s here.”

“We took his phone. He has no way of contacting anyone outside the building. The guards that are assigned to him are always with him and have reported nothing. I’m going to speak to every single one of them, however,” Viktor said. He was just as frustrated as I was with this situation. He felt like it was his responsibility to keep us safe and this was a potential breech of his airtight defenses. Viktor usually stayed calm and we rarely saw him angry, but he was angry over this one. He felt directly responsible for missing that Mike had worked for Anthony.

“What about Chris and Keith?” I asked. “I think they’re both telling the truth, but now I’m not sure I trust myself, so I don’t know if you guys should trust me.”

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“As far as I can tell, they’re telling us the truth now,” Misha said. “If Andy recognized Mike, that means they’d seen each other before. Not necessarily that they’d worked together before. And we were expecting them to be followed when they went to Armando’s house that night. I thought it was weird that they weren’t. It might not be as bad as we think it is.”

I hoped Misha was right. Not just for us, but for the people of the city. We were trying to do this quietly, with as little fallout as possible. I didn’t want to reach the point where chaos was necessary.

Chapter Two Hundred Thirty-Six

Adrik

While the information we'd just discovered was important, I was having trouble keeping my mind from thinking about Sephie and how much I could feel her anger feed into mine. But also, how much control she had over hers, compared to me. My anger always felt like a ticking time bomb, just under the surface. I would have to struggle to keep it contained when it reached a certain point. I had learned over the years to keep it just under that point, so I could use it to my advantage when I needed to intimidate someone. Sephie, however, could raise and lower her anger at will.

I'd seen her get so angry that her eyes went dark a few times since I noticed it in the ring with Mike that day. But the few times it happened before, she was visibly angry. Tonight, she looked and felt like she was calming down, but when she opened her eyes after Chris left the office, they were as clark as I'd ever seen them. It surprised me. It was like her anger was cloaked. She didn't look like she was about to lose control, but her eyes told a different story.

While we waited on Keith, I let my anger rise to the point where I knew it was still easily controlled. I needed it to intimidate Keith into telling us everything. Before, Sephie would feel me get angry and would try to help keep me calm. I'd learned that it actually helped me increase the level of anger since I knew I had her to help mitigate it. But tonight, she didn't try to keep me calm when she felt it. I could feel her anger feeding mine, but also controlling mine. I was at a level that it would have been difficult to control previously when Keith walked into the office, but with Sephie by my side, I felt a mastery of it that I'd never felt before. We're going to need to discuss this later.

I squeezed Sephie just a little tighter in my lap, as she was worried that she'd made a huge mistake. I knew she was going to worry over this for a while. "I don't think Chris and Keith are a problem either. I will admit to wanting to just kill Andy and be done with it, but he seems to provide valuable information periodically, so I'm torn on wasting that resource. Maybe we should restrict his movements in the building until this is over, just to be safe. Either keep him in his apartment or keep him in room," I said.

"Room" was a nice way of saying holding cell. It was my own psychological trick I played on people.

"I will say that Keith has talked extensively about his hatred for Mike since he's been gone. I've heard a few stories about when they worked together before moving here and they weren't pleasant stories. There is clear hatred there," Stephen said. "And Chris has talked to Keith about his mom being sick. I might've checked that one out already. It's legit."

We all looked to Stephen, somewhat surprised that he'd checked Chris's story already. "What? I have trust issues," he said, shrugging his shoulders.

"Okay, so Keith and Chris check out, which actually makes life easier. That means less work for us with Armando's security and it also means I don't have to look at Giana as much, which makes me happy. I vote for putting Andy in a room. He can still get messages outside the building with access to windows. If he is getting messages outside," Ivan said.

One of Ivan's strongest traits was being able to think like the enemy. He could put himself in their shoes, think like them, and be able to predict what they would do next. It was a useful skill to have.

"Agreed. Have him moved right away. Chris and Keith can go back to their apartments," I said. Viktor stood up to take care of the arrangements, his phone in hand as he left the office.

Keith stopped by the office on his way by. He looked visibly relieved. "Um, sir, in the interest of full transparency, there is one more thing." He noticed the look on my face and immediately put his hands up in defense in front of him. "No, no. Not about Andy or Mike. This one is about Giana." Chris walked up beside him as he was talking.

"What about her?" Misha said. He was still harboring extreme anger toward her, so it didn't take much to set him off when her name was mentioned right now.

"She does feel bad about what happened and she wants to apologize, but she thinks you all are really Intimidating. We overheard her talking to Armando at his house this past weekend, Keith said.

Misha cursed under his breath while Sephie just laughed. "Keith, I appreciate you trying to help her out and put in a good word for her, but she needs to learn how to be an adult and realize that we're not intimidating. She's just Intimidated. If she would grow a pair, she might get some respect, but having the men in her life speak for her is not going to gain her any favors. Not with me and I feel fairly confident in saying not with any of these guys either," she said.

"Definitely not with me," Misha said. He looked disgusted to even be talking about this.

"I basically told her as much last night,

1. She knows what needs to happen to get back in our good graces. She will either choose to do it or she can continue to live in the Hell she's created for herself," I said. My tone was short, in hopes that it would end the conversation. I was growing tired of any extra drama that affected Sephie.

"She will eventually realize that she's made this into an even bigger issue by acting the way she has," Ivan said. "She's the only one that can correct it."

"You'll do her a bigger favor by telling her that than you will by trying to smooth things over for her," Andrei said. "She's chosen to learn this lesson the hard way, so get out of her way and let her learn it." Even Andrei's tone was short. We were all stressed and this topic seemed ridiculous and trivial comparatively,

Keith simply nodded his head and turned to leave. Chris, who was still visibly nervous, followed quickly behind him. Sephie waited until she heard the elevator doors close, then groaned. "Is it just me or is this Giana thing the stupidest thing ever now? How Is she playing the victim card in this?" She looked at Ivan, who was grinning at her. "Make it stop." She paused for a moment, then added, "wait, no. I didn't mean that in the permanent way. Just make her stop being stupid. Don't make her stop forever more." She couldn't help but laugh at the absurdity of it all, which helped the rest of us relax slightly. I pulled her back against me. I moved her hair off her shoulder, rubbing my facial hair against her neck lightly. I felt her body relax as she took a deep breath. She hugged my arms tighter around her, whispering, "thank you."

Chapter Two Hundred Thirty-Seven

Adrik

Later that night, Sephie and I were finally alone in the penthouse. I didn't wait for her to demand my shirt. I took it off as soon as I closed the door behind us. I pulled her to me, pulling her shirt off and throwing it on the floor so I could put my shirt on her. She had a sly grin on her face as she watched me button up my shirt after putting it on her. "You're getting better at reading my mind," she said.

"Maybe. Or maybe there's something to seeing you in just my shirt that helps me relax," I said as I unbuttoned her pants, sliding them over her hips.

"Well, seeing you relax helps me relax, so who am I to deny you?" she asked. She had a mischievous grin on her face.

"Could you deny me even if you tried, my love?" I asked, picking her up and walking toward one of the couches.

She giggled. It was exactly what I needed to hear. "Okay, so I've proven to fail miserably at that pretty much every time I've tried."

"It's the same reason I don't even try," I said, setting her down. I smiled down at her, taking her hand and pulling ber into my lap as I sat down. She was still laughing when she straddled my lap. "I needed to hear your laugh, solnishko."

She leaned in and pressed her lips to mine gently. "I needed to laugh," she said. "I'm glad we got to go to the house this past weekend. I find myself wanting to go back. Each day seems to bring some new drama that makes me want to punch something."

"You and me both," I said, resuming my eternal battle with the curls around her face. This was one battle I would never tire of losing. She was quiet for a moment, so I decided to bring up what I'd felt in the office. "I think we should talk about what happened in the office. It was definitely different this time." I said, my fingers lightly running down the side of her face and neck. She closed her eyes, leaning into my touch.

"I could feel you struggling against your anger when Andy was in the office. Like you were trying to contain it," she said without opening her eyes. "But then you relaxed like always when I put my hands on you after Andy left." She opened her eyes and looked at me. "It felt different for me when we were waiting on Keith to come to the office. I could feel your anger, but I could also feel that you had it contained and that you were doing it on purpose. Your anger has never scared me or intimidated me or anything like that because I know it's not directed at me, but I found myself kind of liking being able to feel it while we waited on Keith." She had a sly smile creep across her lips as she admitted to liking it.

"I've always struggled to contain my anger, solnishko. There's a certain level I can let it get to where I can easily contain it, but still intimidate the hell out of anyone who needs it. I've learned that I can increase that level dramatically when you're with me, because you help me keep it contained, if you will. But when we were waiting on Keith, I knew that you knew what I was doing. It was at the highest level it's ever been at when he walked into the office without me beating someone to death. And I have no idea how you made that happen," I said, smirking at her curious expression as I told her what I had felt.

"What about when I got mad when Keith was in the office? You had to calm me down instead of the other way around," she asked.

"That's where it gets interesting. You knew how angry I was because you got up so I could pace before I said anything, but as soon as I felt you lose control, mine vanished and all I could think about was you. But I felt you lose control. That's the weird part. We've been saying for months now that you have a switch that flips when you get angry. We can see it happen on your face when Andrei or Misha says something to get you angry when you're training. We can also see it switch back off after. But I felt it tonight before I saw it happen." I continued my battle with the curls around her face. She looked lost in thought, chewing on her bottom lip.

"A switch flipping is probably the best way to describe it. That's pretty much what it's always felt like. I'm getting better at being able to control it when it happens, but I was so angry tonight that I didn't realize it had flipped until I felt your hand on me. I was surprised you were having to calm me down."

"Your eyes went dark again, too. Darker than I've ever seen them," I said. She smiled at the clear look of lust that I'm sure was evident on my face as I thought about it.

"I will admit to being angrier about being wrong about Andy than I have been about anything in a long time. But I don't know about my eyes changing colors. That one still escapes me. I don't know when that's happening or why it happens. The second time it happened, I thought I was calming down but you told me to blink again. I was almost scared to open my eyes again," she said, laughing.

"I thought you were calming down too. I didn't feel your anger at all when it happened. It was like your anger was in stealth mode. Still fully present but completely under the surface. That's why I kissed you. That always helps me make my anger completely dissipate, so I tried it with you, hoping it would work with you too."

"It worked." She grinned at me. "I was left wanting more instead of thinking about wanting to break Andy's face."

"Good. At least I know I have a kill switch," I said, laughing.

"This is going to make my street cred go through the roof." She had pressed her body to mine, her head on my shoulder, laughing.

She sat up again, looking at me, her eyes still laughing. "You really feel like you have more control when I'm with you?"

"Absolutely. My anger has always felt like barely contained chaos. But when you're with me, it's more like controlled chaos. It's there, but I don't have to struggle as hard against it to make sure it stays contained." She was chewing on her bottom lip again. her mind was clearly racing. "Even Viktor has noticed it. Out of all of them, he knows my bloodlust the best. He's seen me completely out of control more than any of the other guys. He noticed the first time you stopped it with just a look."

Her eyebrows furrowed. "But what if it's a bad thing that I'm stopping it? I mean, even I'm losing patience with this whole situation. It might be over with already if I hadn't stopped it."

I was surprised that she admitted she was losing patience with everything going on. I knew she was stressed. We all were. But I didn't realize she was to the same point I was already. It was my turn to get lost in my thoughts for a moment. I felt her fingers lightly running over my facial hair, but she stayed quiet. It was one of the many things I loved about her. She was just as comfortable in silence as she was talking.

I was I had been worried this entire time that I would somehow lose her because of my bloodlust. If she saw that side of me, terrified she wouldn't want to be with me any longer. I'd been trying to keep that side of me as quiet as possible. But with each day, with each new piece of this puzzle, it was getting harder and harder to keep that side of me quiet.

I felt her fingers under my chin, lifting it so I would look at her. She was smiling sweetly at me. She leaned down, pressing her lips gently to mine. "I will never not want to be with you, Adrik."

I felt a huge wave of relief. I smiled at her, putting my hands on either side of her face, kissing her once more. "I don't know why it surprises me when you read my mind at this point," I said. "You're going to make it very difficult to surprise you."

-"Wait until I get that crystal ball. You're all toast!" she said, laughing. All the stress of the day seemed to melt away as we laughed together on the couch. I still wasn't sure how she could do it, but I knew I was completely addicted to her magic

Chapter Two Hundred Thirty-Eight

Adrik

Sephie was still getting dressed the next morning when I called the guys to the penthouse. She was moving a little slower than I was, which was completely my fault. I might've kept her awake and incredibly active for most of the night last night. She didn't want to wake up this morning. I was somewhat surprised that she didn't stay asleep, but she woke as soon as I did this morning.

Being able to feel what she's feeling was making our s ex life phenomenal. I was completely addicted to the feeling now. She had told me that she's been feeling it for a while. It got much stronger for her once I stopped holding back, but it took me longer to tap into her. She's said all along that I've been able to read her mind when it comes to s ex, which is true. She rarely has to give me directions and she still always seems to be lost in the euphoria. Now, however, it seems like she can bring me into that euphoria. I've felt things I didn't even know were possible and I'm completely addicted. I'm an addict for her.

"Who wants breakfast?" Sephie asked as she walked into the kitchen, her smile making the room brighter. Even though she wa tired, she looked bright this morning. She had an extra glow about her that made her look even more beautiful. She caught me open-mo uth staring at her when she walked into the kitchen. Her cheeks flushed as she walked to me, a devilish grin on her face. She had long ago gotten over being shy about kissing me in front of the guys, but she still only did it occasionally. I didn't mind. I liked having parts of her that were completely reserved for me. She surprised me by kissing me deeply, then continuing on to the refrigerator, her devilish grin still evident on her face. It took all of my self-control not to follow her to continue that kiss.

She took a quick inventory of the refrigerator, her back to us now. She turned around, looking between me and Viktor, asking "how much time do we have before you're all needed downstairs?"

"His first meeting isn't until 11, sestrichka," Viktor said.

Her smile returned. "Raise your hand if you want syrniki for breakfast." All of our hands shot up. Syrniki was a type of pancake that was popular in Russia for breakfast. We'd all grown up eating them for breakfast, but it was difficult to find outside of Russia. She laughed as she started pulling the ingredients out of the refrigerator and setting them on the counter.

"When did you learn to make symniki, spider monkey?" Andrei asked.

She giggled. "Today. Right now. You're all my test subjects." Her beautiful smile stretched across her face. She pulled a book from one of the cabinets. "I found an old cookbook at the house and I figured you guys might be okay with being test subjects for my foray into making Russian dishes."

"Just when I thought I couldn't love you any more than I already do, here we are," Misha said.

"I'm going to have to add cooking classes to the list of things to teach your future girlfriends and Stephen's future boyfriend," she said, laughing.

The guys all looked at each other, then looked back to Sephie. "YES!" they all said in unison.

While Sephie worked on making breakfast, we all pitched in where we could and helped as we talked about the latest information. Sephie remained quiet through most of the conversation, but she was actively listening to us while she focused on breakfast. I was still worried about her zoning out, so I found myself keeping a closer eye on her than normal. I caught Ivan doing the same, as he had also noticed she was quieter than normal.

I made her coffee just the way she liked it and walked to her side. The guys were deep in discussion about Andy, so I had a chance to quietly make sure she was good. I handed her the cup of coffee, my eyebrow raised. "You're okay, solnishko? You're quieter than normal."

Her gorgeous smile stretched across her face. "I'm trying to make sure I don't fu ck this up," she said pointing to the bowl of batter in front of her. I laughed, leaning down to kiss her forehead. Ivan had caught the exchange as well and visibly relaxed when he heard her answer, She stood on her toes to kiss me quickly. "You and Ivan can relax," she said winking at me. Both Ivan and I looked at her, surprised. She hadn't seen Ivan, as he was behind her. "I can feel him watching me," she said quiet enough that only I could hear. She giggled at my surprised expression.

"You never cease to amaze me," I said, kissing her forehead one more time.

The penthouse quickly filled with the aroma of the syrniki frying, causing all of our stomachs to growl in appreciation. Our mo uths were watering in anticipation. Sephie turned around with the first batch and saw the looks of hunger on our faces. "I'm suddenly painfully aware that I should've made more," she said as she set them down in front of us.

While we had been talkative while she was cooking, we were now completely silent as we all ate. She continued to cook the rest of the syrniki, but our silence had made her nervous. "Is the silence good or you're all trying to find a way to politely tell me they su ck?" she asked as she set more pancakes down in front of us. Not a word was spoken, but we all grabbed more pancakes from the plate. She laughed. "Taking that as a good sign."

"Seph, these might be better than my m om's. Let's keep that between us though. She'll smack me," Stephen said as he took another bite of pancake.

As we finished up cleaning the kitchen after quite possibly the best breakfast ever, Misha's phone beeped. He pulled it from his pocket, looking at it, then looking at Sephie. "Ms. Jackson asked if you're free to come to her apartment this morning?" he asked.

"Oh, sure. I can go see her for a bit. I haven't seen her since last week, now that I think about it," she said.

"At least one of you go with her. Preferably two," I said as I pulled her to me. Her smile threatened to stop my heart. She said quietly, "you're feeling extra protective."

"I can't help it. You don't know what you do to me," I said, holding her tightly against me.

"Oh, I know exactly what I do to you," she said, laughing.

Misha and Andrei interrupted our exchange by announcing they would both go with her to Ms. Jackson's apartment. Those two were always ready for an adventure when it came to Sephie.

"Good. Stop by the office when you're done. My afternoon isn't that busy," I said, kissing her lips. I couldn't help myself and I deepened the kiss. I felt her knees go weak, so I held her tighter against me, which only served to make her kiss me more passionately.

"Kiss me like that and I'd stop by even if your afternoon was busy," she said, her cheeks flushed.

"Why does it kind of feel like watching your parents make out now?" Andrei asked to nobody in particular, causing all of us to laugh.

Sephie grinned up at me, but pointed in Andrei's direction. "Nobody said you had to watch, Bubba," she said, trying to keep a straight face. It caused another round of laughter from everyone.

We all got on the elevator together, still laughing and joking, generally in a great mood after such a fantastic morning just the seven of us. I pulled Sephie in for another kiss before I stepped off the elevator. She quickly said, "close your eyes, Bubba," before leaning in to kiss me. It was not the kiss I was hoping for, simply because I was laughing too hard. God, I love her.

Chapter Two Hundred Thirty-Nine

Sephie

Andrei, Misha, and I were still laughing at each other when we walked up to Ms. Jackson's door. I half-expected her to hear us coming down the hallway, but I still had to knock. She opened the door, just as excited as always that I'd brought eye candy for her.

"Oh my, you brought me two today. You really do love me, child," she said as I hugged her. She stepped back to let us into her apartment. That's when I noticed Giana sitting at her kitchen table. One glance at Ms. Jackson told me that Giana had put her up to this. Misha cursed under his breath beside me. This should be lun.

I felt both Misha and Andrei put their hands on the small of my back, like they were ready for Giana to attack me. I could barely keep from laughing at that thought. I knew they were just being protective. They really were quite good at their jobs. They looked down at me, both had questioning looks on their faces. "We don't have to stay, gazelle," Misha said in Russian.

Ms. Jackson looked at Misha, answering in Russian, "at least give her a chance. She's trying to make things right, at least give her a chance to do so." She crossed her arms across her chest and gave him a stern look that dared him to argue with her.

He cursed under his breath, but didn't argue. I did notice that both Andrei and Misha stayed closer to me than they normally would have in Ms. Jackson's apartment. I smiled to myself knowing they felt so protective of me in such a minor situation. We walked further into her apartment. Both guys stepped in front of me, partially shielding me from Giana. I wasn't quite sure if they thought she was going to come at me or if they were worried I was going to have a go at her. It could go either way, really.

We walked to the kitchen table, but I didn't make a move to sit. I was happy to hear her out, but I also wasn't going to go out of my way to be nice to her. I'd already tried that route and it got me here. Giana looked up at both Andrei and Misha. I couldn't see their faces, but I was sure it was obvious they were angry. Giana asked, "do they both need to be here?"

I laughed. "You've been around long enough, Giana. You know I don't go anywhere without them," I said, flatly.

She took a deep breath, then surprised me by speaking Italian so they couldn't understand. Ms. Jackson, who didn't know I could understand Italian, looked to me then back at Giana then back to me. Misha had to tell her quietly that I could understand Italian.

"Sephie, I do want to apologize to you. I unfairly judged you. You had so much knowledge about that drug and what it does to the people who take it that I thought you were an addict. You don't understand. In my family, addicts are the sc um of the earth. I automatically assumed you were one and thought the worst of you instead of finding out the truth," she said,

I answered her in English. I wasn't going to make this easy on her. "Are you asking me for the truth now? Or are you just sorry that you got caught judging me unfairly?" I could feel my anger starting to rise. Her apology was weak and she was still not taking ownership of her actions. "Or are you sorry that having Armando, then Keith, and now Ms. Jackson try to apologize for you isn't working in your favor?"

"I want to know the truth," she said quietly, in Italian.

"You better be sure about that, because the truth won't make you feel any better about this situation," I said. The guys both recognized the edge to my voice and tensed. Giana didn't say anything, she just nodded her head.

"The truth is that I was forced to live with my uncle after my m om died suddenly. He was the addict, not me. I learned about the effects of that drug to survive his repeated beatings. I learned how to wait it out long enough that the drug would make him pass out so I could lock myself in my room, hoping desperately that I would survive the night. I know all about the signs to look for when someone is on that drug because it literally meant life and death for me. I learned how to avoid him until he nattad zoo hot it didn't slu ve work and he would estch me when I cama hama dalharina s fresh bustina – It'e alen the raston T don't show my body to just anyone. My back is covered in scars because of the effects of that drug. Yet, you assume it's because I was the addict and instead of owning your mistake, you pretend you're the victim in this situation, blaming your family for your false judgment. You assume that I'm prudish or ultra religious because I don't want people to see my scars so they can judge me unfairly the same way you have. You see, I've dealt with people like you since I was a teenager. Those who find out the truth still find ways to look at me differently, but it's not because of me. This isn't on me, Giana. This is all on you and why you feel the need to try and tear me down to make yourself feel better, because that's exactly what you're doing. You just haven't realized that there's nothing bad you can say to me that hasn't already been said. You're allowed to think whatever you need to about me to make yourself feel better, but do not, under any circumstances, expect me to continue to be nice or friendly toward you until you can own your actions and apologize like a fu cking adult, without the help of anyone else."

Her eyes were wide as I talked. Misha had quietly reached down and grabbed my hand as I was talking. He knew I was angry. but he also knew I never wanted to have this conversation in the first place. Giana was too stunned to talk when I finished. Andrei looked at her, saying, "that's not even half of what she's been through in her life. She's survived things that I'm not sure I could've survived. She's also been nothing but nice to you since you've been here. She's the reason you and Mando are together now and this is how you choose to think of her? I hope you feel bad about this, Giana, I really, truly do. Because while Sephie is too nice to tell you how much you've hurt her over this, I don't give a fu ck. You hurt her again and I can promise you, we won't be able to hold back next time."

There was an urgent knock at Ms. Jackson's door that interrupted our conversation. Misha and Andrei looked at each other, surprised. Andrei moved to the door, while Misha put himself between the door and me. Andrei looked through the peep ho le, then back to us, a small smile on his face. He opened the door to reveal a worried Adrik at the door. He walked into the apartment immediately, searching for me. Misha had stepped aside once Andrei started to open the door, so Adrik found me almost immediately. He was by my side in seconds.

I couldn't help the smile that crept across my face. "You felt me get angry, didn't you?" I asked, in Russian. He nodded, pulling me to him. He looked at Giana at the table, a new look of worry on her face since he arrived. He looked back to me, saying, "well, at least I know why you were angry now. I did not expect her to be here."

"We didn't either," Misha said. I could still hear the anger in his voice too.

Adrik glanced at both of them, then to Ms. Jackson who was also stunned at what she'd just witnessed. He looked back at me, then finally to Giana. "We're done here," he said in English as he pulled me with him toward the door. Andrei, who was still standing close to the door, opened it for us, following behind us and Misha.

As the elevator doors closed, Adrik said, "close your eyes, Andrei." His lips crashed into mine as he pressed me against the wall of the elevator. We could hear both of them laughing at us, but I didn't care. This time, I didn't realize how angry I was until he kissed me and I felt it subside. The doors dinged, signaling our arrival to his office floor. He broke the kiss, catching his breath. Andrei and Misha both stepped off the elevator to give us a moment.

"Shi t," I said. He looked at me, a curious look on his face. "I didn't know I was that angry until you kissed me," I said, quietly.

He grinned at me. "Your control is impressive, solnishka. It also explains why your eyes are now normal again," he said, kissing my forehead. "Come, you can keep me company while we wait for my 11 o'clock meeting that, luckily, was late today." He grabbed my hand, pulling me toward his office.

"They weren't normal when you got to me?" I asked as we walked to his office.

He shook his head no. "I want to ask Andrei and Misha if they noticed it." We walked into his empty office. He stuck his head outside the door, calling for Andrei and Misha. They both walked in and took a seat. "Did either of you notice anything different about Sephie's eyes when she was down there?"

Andrei said, "Net, I was staring down Glana the whole time, to be honest. I was standing close enough to Sephie that I could feel her, so I didn't need to look at her."

Adrik nodded once, then looked to Misha. "I glanced at her when she was listening to Giana's initial apology. They looked darker, but I thought it was just because of the lighting in Ms. Jackson's kitchen. I knew she was angry though, so I grabbed her hand to try and help calm her down while she told Giana more than she ever wanted to."

I could feel myself getting upset and I heard the elevator ding, likely bringing Adrik's meeting with it. "Let's talk about this. later." They all looked at me with concern on their faces. "Please?" I said, smiling to try and let them know I was okay.

Chapter Two Hundred Forty

Sephie

Just as his late meeting walked into the office, he looked at Andrei and Misha and said, in Russian, “take her upstairs. Stay with her. I’ll be up after this meeting is over. Get Ivan on your way up.” He pulled me to him for a quick kiss. “I love you, solnishko. I’ll be up as fast as I can,” he said, nodding to Andrei, who was standing behind me now. I felt Andrei put his hand on my back, guiding me toward the door. Once we were outside his office and out of sight of the meeting, Andrei stopped me. He stepped in front of me and turned away from me. He squatted down, opening his arms for me to jump on his back. I giggled, hopping on his back.

“You’re my favorite, Bubba,” I said. I hugged his neck tightly as we walked to the elevator. When the doors opened, Ivan was in the elevator. Misha had texted him from the office.

“You guys want to tell me what happened? I’m guessing something happened if you’re back this early from Ms. Jackson’s apartment,” Ivan said.

I sighed, trying to make sure I didn’t get angry again. I didn’t want to interrupt Adrik’s meeting and have him rush up to the penthouse because he was worried about me. Thankfully, Misha answered for me. “Giana was waiting for her when she got to Ms. Jackson’s apartment.”

I could see Ivan’s anger rise as he cursed in Russian. “Does she not know she’s an adult now?”

“Clearly she does not,” Andrei said. I could still hear the edge to his voice. I hugged his neck a little tighter. He squeezed my legs in response.

“We do have to be careful with how much we talk about this or Adrik is going to come rushing upstairs because he knows I’m mad,” I said, trying to keep my smile under control. Ivan’s mo uth fell open, which caused Andrei and Misha to laugh.

“He came to Ms. Jackson’s apartment. He knew she was angry from his office. I’m honestly proud of him for not breaking the door down, but he walked in, basically grabbed Sephie and walked out. You should’ve seen the look on Giana’s face when he showed up,” Misha said, now completely amused by the situation.

As we walked into the penthouse, Ivan asked, “so he can now feel when you’re angry even when you’re not in the same room just like you can feel he’s angry?”

“Yeah. And what’s weird this time is that I didn’t know I was that angry when I was talking to Giana. I mean, I certainly wasn’t happy with her, but he said my eyes went dark, which they only do when I’m like nuclear level angry. Except I didn’t feel like I was that angry.” I looked sideways at Andrei as he placed me on the kitchen counter. “That’s also why he told you to close your eyes in the elevator. That makes it go away for both of us. I’m really sorry for that, by the way. Nobody wants to watch us make out.”

“Spider monkey, don’t apologize for that. I was teasing you this morning. It’s clear as day you two can’t keep your hands off each other. I’m not standing in the way of that,” Andrei said, laughing.

“Your eyes go dark?” Ivan asked, clearly curious.

“I saw it this time, but I thought it was the lighting in Ms. Jackson’s apartment,” Misha said. “They go from three colors to just One.”

“Which one?” Ivan asked.

“Brown, I think. But not the normal golden brown that’s there all the time. Like really dark brown,” Misha said.

Ivan looked to me, clearly curious about this bit of information. I just shrugged my shoulders. “I clearly don’t know anything about it. Not like I can see them. Adrik said he noticed it that day with Mike. He’s seen it a couple times since then. That night in his office when Andy told us Mike was working for Anthony. It happened a few times that night, actually. He tells me to blink and I can usually make it go away.” I looked at Ivan, not able to hide my smile. “Maybe my demons are taking over now. This is my villain origin story.” Ivan grinned at me, shaking his head as he laughed.

Ivan looked to Andrei. “You’ve never noticed it when you’ve sparred with her?”

“No. We can all see the switch flip when she gets angry, but if her eyes have changed, I haven’t noticed them. But I usually don’t have a lot of chances to gaze thoughtfully into her eyes,” he said, grinning at me.

“I’ve never noticed her eyes changing when we’ve been training either,” Misha said.

“I think it’s different. You guys can make me angry, but it’s still you and I know it’s still you. We train, yes, but I don’t really want to hurt either one of you. Like, you guys pick at surface level stuff to get me angry. When I’ve gotten so angry that my eyes changed, it’s much deeper wounds those people are poking at, I said, looking at the floor. I could feel myself getting upset again, so I tried to distract myself by staring at my feet dangling over the side of the kitchen counter.

“Princess…” Ivan said as he moved next to me.

“Yep, still here. Just trying to not be upset right now,” I said, trying to smile through the pain. Ivan didn’t say anything further, but he hopped onto the counter next to me. I felt his substantial arm slide gently around my shoulders and pull me toward him. I leaned my head on his shoulder. I took a deep breath and exhaled loudly. “Like, it’s not just me, right? I’m not being unreasonable here? Please tell me if I am. I’ll admit I was an as shole right now just to make this st upidity stop.”

“I think you nailed it with everything you said to her, spider monkey. I’m proud of you,” Andrei said.

I smiled at him. “Um, can we talk about how ri diculously cute you were when you threatened her life though? Because that’s a thing.” Ivan laughed, causing me to look at him. “It happened.” I pointed at Andrei. “Adorable.”

We were still laughing and trying to find more things to laugh at to keep me from getting upset when Adrik, Viktor, and Stephen walked in. Adrik still had a worried look on his face, but relaxed slightly when he saw us laughing. Ivan jumped off the counter so Adrik could have access to me. “I’m okay,” I said, as he stepped between my legs, his hands on my thighs.

He searched my eyes for a minute, then clicked his tongue. “Li ar.”

I chuckled. “I’m mostly okay,” I said, smiling at him.

“Tell me what happened,” he said. He was looking at Misha and Andrei when he said it.

“Giana was waiting for us when we got to Ms. Jackson’s apartment. I don’t know how much Ms. Jackson knows about what happened, but Giana definitely put her up to calling us down there. I told Sephie we didn’t have to stay, but I got reprimanded by Ms. Jackson,” Misha said, sheepishly.

“Giana tried to get rid of me and Misha too. Sephie just laughed at her. Why does everyone want to get rid of us, spider monkey? It hurts my feelings,” Andrei said, his handsome smile stretching across his face.

“What did she say to you when she was speaking Italian?” Misha asked.

I scoffed. “She said she owed me an apology, that because I knew so much about brawn, she just assumed I was an addict, then she told me I didn’t understand and that in her family, addicts are the sc um of the earth and she assumed I was one before finding out the truth.”

They all looked at me, somewhat stunned. “I’m even more impressed with the restraint you showed when you responded to her, then,” Andrei said.

“That’s quite possibly the weakest apology I’ve ever heard,” Viktor said.

“Was it her first time? Feels like her first time,” Stephen said.

“This explains why she wanted everyone else to apologize for her. She su cks at it,” Ivan said.

I couldn’t help but laugh at their responses. “Are you guys saying this just because it’s me and you all love me and want to protect me? You can tell me if I’m being the bi tch here.”

“Noooo, Seph. That’s a terrible apology. She’s deflecting all responsibility on to her family, who has nothing to do with this. She’s old enough that she should be able to think for herself at this point in her life and make her own decisions about people. Blaming them is la zy. Quite frankly, I’m offended by her lack of imagination,” Stephen said.

“What was your response?” Ivan asked, looking at me. I took a deep breath again, trying not to get upset by having to retell it.

Misha answered for me. “In normal Sephie fashion, she verbally annihilated her. She asked if Giana was asking for the truth now. She even made Giana say yes twice before she told her about her uncle and how he was the reason she had so much. knowledge about brawn. It went downhill for Giana from there.”

I could feel Adrik’s anger starting to rise, which wasn’t helping mine stay quiet. I put my hands on his chest. “It’s okay. Andrei threatened her life after I got done. That’s when you showed up and rescued me,” I said, grinning at him.

Chapter Two Hundred Forty-One

Sephie

“Judging from what I felt in my office, it’s a good thing for Giana that I did. It was so strong and so sudden,” Adrik said, his eyes showing nothing but concern.

“I didn’t know I was that angry,” I said, looking down at my hands.

“When I got to you, it changed. There was a calm to you, but I could still feel it. It felt like mine, when I’m using it to intimidate someone. Like it’s just under the surface, only yours is much less chaotic than mine. Yours is focused,” he said, his finger lightly playing with the curls around my face. “But your eyes were dark. That’s one of the reasons I pulled you from the apartment.”

“There was more than one reason?” I asked.

He nodded. “I’m si ck of things that stress you out and make you relive your past before you’re ready. Especially when it’s as trivial as this is,” he said.

“So, it’s not just me then,” I said, smiling. I grabbed his shirt and pulled him to me so I could kiss him. He leaned back, smiling at me. “It’s not just you, solnishko. This is a ri diculous matter. I’m thinking of telling Armando to just keep her away from us for the time being. We have enough to worry about without having to worry about 12-year-old girl drama,” he said.

“I think that might make him mad. He’s in an awkward spot and you need him. I don’t have an issue with Armando. I wouldn’t have an issue with Giana if she would act her age. Maybe wait on talking to him. Let’s see what today does for her,” I said. “She might keep herself away from us on her own. No need to put Armando into an even more awkward spot.”

Viktor’s phone rang. He checked the number, then walked toward me. “It’s Chen,” he said, handing the phone to me, I put it on speaker. “What’s up, Chen?”

“Sephie. How are you, my girl?”

“Good, Chen. How are you? Everything okay?” I asked, somewhat concerned as to why he was calling.

“Yeah, everything is fine for now, but it might not be for long. DJ has some info from his extensive networks through the city. Dude knows everything that’s going on in the city, I swear. The people in Sal’s part of the city are about to revolt. They’re organizing to fight back against Sal. Word has it that Anthony and Sal’s long-lost brother are coming back, too.”

“Well, shi t.”

“Accurate response. DJ seems to think that if Sal’s area starts to revolt, then other areas of the city will follow,” he said.

“Double shi t. If that happens, they won’t even need the brawn. There will be chaos in the city without it. Does DJ happen to know if there’s clear leaders in this organization of the people in Sal’s area of town?” I asked.

“He didn’t say for sure, but I’d bet good money the answer is yes. DJ knows everyone. Everyone knows DJ. He’s like a rockstar of drug dealers,” Chen said, laughing.

“Can you see if he can find out that information? We can meet with them, same as we met with you. We’re trying to keep innocent people from getting hurt. If they revolt, I’m worried that there will be mass casualties,” I said. I glanced up to Adrik, who had a smirk on his face.

“I will get that info for you and get back to you.”

“Sooner is better, as I’m sure you know,” I said.

“Don’t worry, my girl. This public servant offers prompt service,” he said, laughing.

“Thank you, Chen. You’re the best,” I said, ending the call.

I handed the phone back to Viktor, then looked at Adrik curious as to why he was smirking at me. “You’re a natural at this, solnishko. I don’t even need to tell you what to do. You’re already three steps ahead in any situation,” he said, smiling down at

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“Told you. You were made for this shi t, gazelle,” Misha said, his broad smile stretched across his face.

Adrik spent as much time in the penthouse with me and the guys as he could before returning to his office for the rest of his meetings that day. He promised he would make everything as quick as possible so he could get back to me. He also made sure that Ivan, Andrei, and Misha knew to stay with me the rest of the afternoon.

“They can help me cook dinner,” I said, grinning at Adrik as he pulled me to him before leaving.

“I’ll do anything you want after that breakfast this morning,” Misha said, rubbing his stomach. I couldn’t help but giggle at his response, which helped Adrik relax too. He was still worried about me. He leaned down and kissed me gently, telling me once more he would be back as quickly as possible and that he loved me. It made me feel all soft and nougaty inside that they were all so worried about me. And that they all felt so protective of me. I was starting to get used to it, but it was still a new phenomenon in my life. I was so used to being on my own and dealing with everything by myself. Used to having my closest friend ditch me for his latest bedroom conquest. Used to only telling people the bare minimum about me for fear they would

run away.

We moved to the couches after Adrik left with Viktor and Stephen. Ivan pulled me against him once more, his giant arm holding me close. I looked up at him. “I think I need the acupuncture lady again,” I said. He just grinned at me. “I was just about to say that, princess. I can give her a call and see when she can come,” he said as he got up from the couch, pulling his phone from his pocket.

When he got up, I got a chill, so I ran back to the bedroom to grab one of Adrik’s sweatshirts. When I came back out, Andrei saw the sweatshirt and just opened his arms. “Come here, spider monkey.” I grinned at him, running to the couch. He moved so I could lean back against him for maximum warmth.

Ivan walked back to the couches, laughing at me curled up next to Andrei under a new layer of clothing. “She’ll be here in two hours, princess. It might help you getting cold so much lately too. I had that problem before and she fixed it,” he said.

“She did? No wonder you’ve kept her a secret for so many years,” I said.

Ivan laughed. “I would’ve shared, but nobody else was interested.”

“I didn’t know it was a thing that people did until Sephie’s concussion,” Misha said.

“It seems painful. Why would you want to be stabbed repeatedly? I’ve been stabbed twice. I didn’t enjoy it,” Andrei said.

I laughed. “Bubba, it’s not like getting stabbed. They’re like tiny little needles. It’s more annoying than anything when she first puts them in, but then it all goes away and it makes everything feel better. The first time hurt the worst, but after that, it didn’t hurt much at all.”

“The first time, I had to keep Adrik from going In to save you,” Ivan said, smirking at me.

I sighed. “If I haven’t told yoit lately, I adore how protective you all are of me. Going from being completely on my own to now having you guys ready to punch a bi tch because she was rude to me is a very nice change in my life.”

“You deserve it. gazelle. You deserve to have people around you that love you and want to take care of you,” Misha said. Andrei tightened his grip around me, pulling me closer. I suddenly felt much warmer as I smiled at Misha and Ivan. I grabbed Andrei’s.

arm and held on to it as we talked.

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Chapter 242

Chapter Two Hundred Forty-Two

Sephie

I felt Andrei gently shake me. “Spider monkey, it’s time for your acupuncture.” I didn’t realize I had fallen asleep while we were talking. I was still tired from Adrik keeping me up too late the night before, plus having to deal with Giana unexpectedly, I must’ve just passed out. Andrei was warm enough that I was sound asleep when the acupuncturist got there.

I rubbed my eyes, still not completely awake. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to fall asleep, but thank you for keeping me warm,” I said.

“You only fall asleep when you really need it, spider monkey. You’ve had to deal with a lot. I’m glad you got a quick nap,” Andrei said.

Ivan walked in with the acupuncturist as I stood up from the couch, stretching. The acupuncturist looked at me, then looked at Ivan. “You should’ve called me sooner,” she said, almost chastising him. He looked down at her, surprised by her reaction. He looked to me, somewhat worried. She walked to me, taking my hand and leading me to one of the spare bedrooms. Poor Ivan just stood there, still stunned as we disappeared into the bedroom.

“It’s not Ivan’s fault. He’s the one that suggested we call you again,” I said. She looked up at me while she unpacked her bag, a large smile on her face.

“Sometimes I like to give Ivan a hard time. It keeps him on his toes,” she said, laughing. “But I can tell you’re carrying more than you need to right now.” She took my hand, pressing on the spot that Ivan and Adrik use when I have a headache. She closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them and looked at me, “How are things with your boyfriend?” she asked.

“Good. Really good,” I said. I could feel my cheeks flush as I thought about the night before.

She smiled slyly at me. “You two are very good for each other. But you’re unbalanced. He’s avoiding a piece of him, which is making it grow stronger in you. You’re strong, Sephie, which is why it hasn’t caused a huge problem yet. It will, though, if you, let it go on too long.”

I chewed on my bottom lip while I digested her words. “He’s worried I’ll love him less,” I said. I knew she was talking about his darker side. “He thinks he’s a monster because of it. They all do, if I’m being honest. I don’t know the right words to say to them.”

As she got started stabbing me, as Andrei would say, she said, “monsters choose evil for evil’s sake. I don’t know your boyfriend, but I know Ivan. Ivan is not a monster. There’s a difference between a dangerous man and a monster. A dangerous man has looked in the face of evil and chosen to be good. A dangerous man knows he has a large capacity for evil, but he chooses to control that side of him. Ivan is dangerous. I’m thinking your boyfriend is also dangerous.”

I nodded my head in agreement. “He’s been fighting that side of him that is needed to take care of the situation we’re facing at the moment, because he’s worried that it will change my opinion of him.”

“Will it?”

“Not in the least. I love him. All of him,” I said.

She was quiet as she continued stabbing me. She finally looked at me watching her. “I can talk to him. He listened to me last time. It’s obvious he wants to do what is best for you. By him avoiding that side of himself, he’s transferring it to you. You can control it now, but it will ultimately become too much for you to bear. You two have a special relationship. It’s been getting more so, hasn’t it? More Intimate?” she asked.

I couldn’t help the smile on toy face, I didn’t even need to answer. She saw the look on my face and knew the answer. “It will be more so once he restores balance,” she said. She had finished placing the needles where they needed to go. She patted my arm. saying. “I will go tell Ivan I need to see your boyfriend. I’ll be right back.” She left me to my own thoughts about how much more intimacy I could handle. In addition to being able to feel each other’s anger, we were starting to feel other emotions just as strongly. Mostly when it comes to s ex, but I was noticing it other times now too. It seemed like I would notice these things first, then Adrik would be able to feel the same thing soon after. While I’d been able to essentially read his mind from the beginning, he was now beginning to be capable of doing the same to me.

My mind wandered to the dream I had where my dad had told me that Adrik and I were always meant to find each other. Were we able to do these things because we’d spent so many lifetimes together or was this the first lifetime we’d discovered the ability to do it? I wasn’t sure I would ever get the answer to that question, but it made me smile to think about falling in love with him over and over again. I knew what we had was special and there wasn’t a day that went by that I wasn’t incredibly grateful for it.

We finished the session. Just as we walked out of the spare bedroom, Adrik walked through the penthouse looking for me. He had a wide smile across his face as his eyes landed on mine. He closed the distance between us quickly. “You feel better, solnishko,” he said as he pulled me to him. He kissed my cheek, leaning down to my car to add, “I could feel it too.” His smile widened once more when he stood up and saw the look of surprise on my face. He pushed a curl from my face. “You look lighter again.”

I giggled. “You do too. There’s some weird acupuncture by osmosis going on here.”

The acupuncturist took the opportunity to motion us back into the spare bedroom. “I can offer some insight into that. Please,” she said, motioning us to the room.

Adrik grabbed my hand, lacing his fingers through mine as we followed her into the bedroom. Adrik was curious once she closed the door. He looked from me to her, a sly grin on his face. “You offered valuable insight last time. I can’t deny I’m very curious to hear what you have to offer this time.”

She smiled at him. “You two are very special. A bond like yours comes around very rarely.” She looked at both of us, a serious look on her face. “You realize this isn’t the first lifetime you’ve spent together, right?” I smiled, nodding my head. Adrik just put his arm around me, pulling me to him. She smiled at both of us. “I told you last time that you each find balance within the other. In Chinese medicine we call it the yin and the yang. There are parts of each in the other, but one is more masculine while the other is feminine. Together, you find balance.” She looked directly at Adrik, even more serious than before. “Right now, you’re fighting your masculine, which is causing it to show up more in Sephie. She’s very strong, so she’s been able to handle it, but it won’t always be this way. It will eventually cause problems.” She held her hand out, asking for his hand. He placed his hand in hers. She pressed on the same spot between his thumb and forefinger that she had pressed on me while she closed her eyes. When she opened her eyes, she looked more determined and slightly surprised. “She’s stronger than I thought. You’re very strong, but she’s able to handle it.”

“What do you mean? Are you talking about my anger?” Adrik asked.

“Yes, that’s part of it. Anger can be very useful when used correctly. Your anger is only a piece of it, though. That part of you that wants to protect her is very strong, but you’re fighting the very thing that will resolve your problems. I don’t know what’s going on. I don’t need to know what’s going on, but it’s big. It’s only going to get bigger the longer you keep trying to suppress the side of you that can take care of it. Sephie told me earlier that you’re worried you’re a monster because of it. I will tell you the same thing I told her. The same thing I’ve told Ivan, too, for the record. There is a difference between being a monster and being dangerous. A dangerous man knows how capable of evil acts he truly is, but he accepts that part of himself and chooses good. A monster will give in to the evil side of himself every time. You’re incredibly strong. You’ve already fa ced more evil in your short life than most will in their entire lives. Your hesitancy to use that side of you, even though you’re using it for good, will continue to upset the balance you two find in each other.”

He looked at me, his eyes were now wide with worry. She laughed. “You’re not hurting her. She can handie It. Have you ever tried to ignore an emotion before?” she asked. He nodded his head. “Have you noticed how that emotion never really goes away? It just gets bigger. Or sometimes it will appear to have gone away, but it always comes back as something else and ten times worse. This is what’s happening now. But because of the bond you two share, she’s showing you what you’re ignoring.”

She looked at me. “You’ve had more anger lately, haven’t you?” I nodded my head. “But you’ve also been getting cold more?” I nodded again. She thought for a moment. “Can you calm his anger when it happens?”

Chapter Two Hundred Forty-Three

Sephie

“Like no one else has ever been able to,” Adrik answered.

She inhaled, thinking more before she responded. “Sephie, you’re meant to help him control his anger, but not take it on as your own. The increased cold is a sign from your body that you’re taking too much of his fire, if you will. Your body is trying to rebalance itself.” She then looked to Adrik. “You’re meant to be her fire, but to also let her soothe the flames when needed. The more you fight against your fire, the bigger the inferno will get. She’s trying to help you control it, but subconsciously, she knows you’re fighting against it so she’s taking more of it than she needs to. True power lies in surrender. You are who you are and she loves you for that, just as you love her for who she is. The more you fight against accepting that for a universal truth, the bigger this problem you’re facing will get. By surrendering to who you are, who you’ve always been, but consciously choosing good, you’ll realize your true power.”

Adrik was somewhat stunned, as was 1. She smiled at both of us, moving to get her bag that was sitting close to the window. As she stepped into the sunlight streaming through the window, I could clearly see the outline of a pair of wings behind her. My breath caught, but the vision was gone just as quickly as it appeared. I looked to Adrik to see if he had seen it, but he was curious about my surprise. I decided to keep my mo uth sh ut for the time being about what I’d just seen.

She turned back to us. “It would help if I worked on both of you next time, if you’re up for it?” she asked, looking at Adrik. He glanced down at me, a flash of nervousness on his face, but agreed to it.

“It doesn’t hurt,” I said, smiling sweetly at him. He looked like he wanted to believe me, but he was still very unsure about it. I extended my hand to her. “Thank you, once again, for helping me feel better. You’re an angel.” She took my hand and winked at

1.

We walked out to find all the guys in the penthouse, waiting for us. Ivan got up to take the acupuncturist back downstairs. He smiled at me when he saw me. “Lighter,” he said, following the acupuncturist to the door.

“Sestrichka, you look much better. I didn’t know it would be such an obvious difference,” Viktor said. He looked at Andrei. “You should try it, Andrei. It might make you prettier too. You could use the help.”

“Shots fired, Viktor,” I said laughing. “Don’t listen to him, Bubba. You’re very pretty. You’re a pretty, pretty princess.” I grinned at him as he laughed at us both.

“Sh ut your mo uth, Viktor. She said I was a pretty, pretty princess,” Andrei said, pouting like a kid.

Adrik pulled me closer, his broad smile across his face as he leaned down and pressed his lips to mine. “I fu cking love you,” he said, smiling against my lips.

“And I fu cking love you. Are you done for the day now?” I asked. He nodded his head, kissing my forehead. “Who wants to help me with dinner?” I asked everyone. They all stood at once and started filing toward the kitchen. I looked at Adrik. “They’re all so eager,” I said laughing.

“You had them wrapped around your finger even before you started feeding them, but now that you’re feeding them, you’ll never get rid of them.”

As we fell into the routine of cooking dinner and talking about the day’s events, Viktor told me that my presence had been missed during one of Adrik’s afternoon meetings.

“Oh yeah? Did you meet with Mando?” I asked, curious.

Adrik laughed. “No, it was one of the businessmen that’s in on the project I have with Mando, Neal is his name. He’s still laughing about your wet dream comment. We’re all meeting with a few restaurants on Monday to gauge interest and to see if we can secure occupancy even before the project begins. He requested your presence on Monday,” he said, smirking at me.

“Sh ut up.”

Viktor laughed. “It’s true. He was disappointed you weren’t around today. He said he hasn’t laughed that hard in a business meeting in a very long time.”

“What did you say, gazelle?” Misha asked.

“They were worried that restaurants wouldn’t want to lease space in their building. I told them it was basically a restaurant’s wet dream because they didn’t even have to do outside marketing. Their customer base was the building.” I said.

“But then she said, ‘oh shi t I just said that out loud didn’t I’ as she covered her mo uth,” Adrik said, laughing. He stepped closer to me, but I pushed him back, playfully.

“In my defense, I wasn’t supposed to be in that meeting,” I said, laughing.

“Your inability to control your mo uth is one of the best things about you, sestrichka. You did warn us about it that first day. I don’t know why you’re surprised by it,” Viktor said. His deep laugh filling the penthouse. I got caught up in the pure joy that was laughing and joking with the guys. I knew our strange family dynamic was misunderstood by just about everyone else, but I loved it.

We spent the weekend at the penthouse so that I could keep getting acupuncture. She felt it would be helpful for a few days in a row. She also worked on Adrik while she was there. He was somewhat terrified at the thought of it the first time, so he watched while she worked on me first.

“This isn’t helping me feel better about this process, solnishko,” he said as he watched her putting the needles where they needed to go. She asked for him to put his hand out in front of hini. He reluctantly did so. She flipped his hand over and placed one needle in his wrist, then she did the same on his other wrist. Without a word, she continued placing needles on me where they needed to go. I could feel the anxiety disappear from Adrik as it happened. I picked my head up and looked at him, to see his reaction. His eyes were wide. “What kind of black magic is this, he said laughing. She laughed, but continued working.

Adrik protested a few times as she worked on him, just as I did. Once he got past the initial pain, it started to feel better and he relaxed. The first time was the worst for both of us. Each time she worked on us got better. He was more relaxed than he’d been in a long time by the time Monday rolled around. 1, however, was slightly nervous about being included in this meeting for his building project with Armando.

“At least it gives me a reason to wear the clothes Ms. Jackson talked me into buying,” I said as I got out of the shower.

Adrik raised his eyebrow at me. “What did you have in mind, malishka?” he asked as he watched me wrap a towel around my na ked body.

“Wouldn’t you like to know…”

“Cr uel and unusual punishment is what that is,” he said, smacking my a ss as he walked out of the bathroom.

I decided on a grey pencil skirt and a wh ite blouse. The best part of the outfit, in my opinion, were the red heels. I usually avoided wearing heels. I was tall enough on my own, but being surrounded by literal giants meant that I was always the short one, even with heels. I didn’t have to worry about towering over anyone.

Adrik had gone to the kitchen to return a phone call as I finished getting dressed. I braided my hair, putting on minimal

makeup. I heard him end the call as I walked down the hallway to the kitchen. He turned to look at me, his mo uth open slightly. He groaned. “I’m not going to be able to take my eyes off you during the meeting,” he said, his sexy smirk slowly appearing on his face.

“Is it too much? I don’t want a repeat of the scummy lawyer in Italy,” I asked.

He pulled me to him, holding me tightly. “I’m not giving anyone a moment of hesitation that you’re mine this time,” he said. He grabbed my a ss for emphasis, making me squeal. He took my hands and put them around his neck, wrapping his arms. around my waist. “You look beautiful, Sephie. You always look beautiful, even when you just wake up and have hair that screams I’ve just been properly fu cked.’ That might be my favorite, if I’m being honest,” he said, smiling down at me.

“So, every morning, then?” I asked, laughing at his faraway look that broadcasted his di rty thoughts.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 244

Two Hundred Forty-Four

Adrik

I couldn’t keep my eyes off Sephie even on the elevator down to my office. This is going to be the longest meeting ever.

“Am I expected to remember everyone’s names? Because that’s not a thing I do,” she asked, chewing on her lip.

I laughed. “No, love. You have me. That’s a thing I do. You don’t need to.”

She cut her eyes up at me, a mischievous look in her eye. “I knew I kept you around for a reason,” she said as the doors opened. She walked off the elevator like she owned the place. I’ve never been more turned on in my life.

Armando was already in my office when we walked in. He had a habit of being extra early to large meetings to make sure last-minute details were taken care of. I appreciated it about him, as it meant fewer details for me to have to worry about. He looked up from the papers in his hand as Sephie walked in. “Sephie, my dear. You look beautiful as always, cara mia,” he said, opening his arms for her.

She walked to him. “Mando. It’s so good to see you,” she said as she hugged him.

“It’s been too long. I’ve missed you, but I’m very happy you decided to come today,” he said, kissing both her cheeks. Sephie right. Giana had kept herself away from us so far. Armando had taken her to his house over the weekend again, so it had been a few days since I’d seen him, even. Things seemed calm, for the moment, so I wasn’t complaining.

She stepped back, looking between both Armando and me. “What are the specifics of this meeting again?” she asked. She already knew the answer to that question. She was giving Armando a reason to talk to her. I turned so he couldn’t see me and winked at her as Armando began filling in details about the meeting.

Armando was still talking 20 minutes later when Viktor stuck his head in the office. “Everyone is in the conference room,” he said. He gave Sephie a high-five as she walked by. “You look like you’re about to run this meeting, sestrichka,” he said in Russian as we walked to the conference room.

“I am the go ddamn princess,” she said, her gorgeous smile across her face as she walked into the conference room. I saw her hesitate once she glanced around the room. She turned to me, saying in Russian, “second man from the end on the other side of the table owns the restaurant I used to work at,” she said. I could feel she was still calm. I think it surprised her to see him here more than anything.

I still stopped her before we walked any further. “Is that a problem? I can get rid of him if it is,” I said.

She smiled shyly at me. “He’s fine. He’s a nice guy. I just didn’t expect him to be here,” she said. “But thank you for always being willing to destroy anything that might be a threat to me.”

I kissed her temple as we continued to the table. “Always, my love.” I kept my eye on the man she had pointed out. He was clearly surprised to see Sephie walk into the meeting. Even more surprised that she sat down next to me. I pulled her chair next to mine, stretching my arm across her lap. I nodded to Armando, who started the meeting.

We were pitching the idea of the building to several restaurant owners, hoping they would sign a contract signifying they would lease space once the building was finished. There was space for at least five restaurants, with the potential for splitting the space up into smaller restaurants il necessary. The location was in a great part of town, so it should’ve been an easy sell. A few of the restaurant owners were hesitant, however. The owner of the restaurant where Sephle used to work was one that was hesitant.

“What kind of guarantees do you have that the building will be full? And what kind of taxes are we going to be hit with if we

lease space in this building?” he asked. The tax question was more about which boss that part of the city belonged to. The building was in Armando’s ared of the city, thankfully, so we didn’t need to go into details about how that wouldn’t matter very soon. Two of the other restaurant owners nodded in agreement to his question. I wasn’t sure what areas of the city they were from, but I imagined they were being charged extra taxes right now.

“We already have 30% of the office space leased, as well as 50% of the apartments sold or leased. We haven’t even broke ground on the project yet. The building will be full by the time it’s finished. As for taxes, I don’t charge unfair taxes in my area of the city,” Armando said.

Sephie stood up, going to a map showing the location of the building. “Gentlemen, I don’t know the location of all of your restaurants, but I do know where yours is, Kevin. You’ve got at least 15 other restaurants within a 5-block radius of your restaurant. Those are just the ones I could remember off the top of my head. I’m guessing it’s a similar situation for the rest of you, give or take.” She pointed to the map. “This building will be here.” She ran her finger over an entire block of buildings on the map. “These buildings? Apartments. There’s one bodega, but no restaurants.” She moved to the next block. “These buildings? Office space. Two more bodegas and one coffee shop. No restaurants.” She continued for three more blocks around the location of the new building. “So that makes 5 restaurants total in this 5-block radius, not counting the restaurant space this building will provide. I’m not the best at numbers, but even I know those are pretty fu cking good odds. You’d be id iots not to jump at this chance, but by all means, keep hesitating if you ha te making an easy profit.”

I heard Viktor clear his throat at the door. I knew he was trying not to laugh. I had casually rested my chin in my hand to hide my smile when she got up because I knew whatever she was about to do was going to be great. I glanced at everyone’s faces as she walked back to sit down. My business associates were all trying not to laugh as well. The restaurant owners who were on board originally were also trying not to laugh. The ones who were hesitant all had the look of being fo olish across their faces. Armando caught Sephie’s eye as she sat down, winking at her.

The meeting continued. All restaurant owners were on board by the end of the meeting, all signing contracts to lease space in the building once the building was finished. As the meeting concluded and everything was being finalized with the lawyers in attendance, several of my business associates, including Neal, came up to me and Sephie. “Can she please come to every meeting?” Neal asked, finally able to laugh. The others agreed with him, making her blush. They kept laughing amongst themselves as they talked with each other and the restaurant owners. The owner of the restaurant she used to work at, Kevin, walked up to her as well.

“Sephie, it’s good to see you again,” he said, extending his hand to her.

“Hi Kevin. How are things at the restaurant?” she asked. I knew she was likely curious about Max.

“They’re good. We had a rough patch after you left, but we’re recovering now. Staffing issues,” he said, dismissively.

“Chef issues, you mean?” she asked.

He laughed. “Of course you’d know. Yes, chef issues. It’s been taken care of now and business is picking back up. Numbers at the bar are almost back to normal now,” he said.

“Good. That makes me happy to hear. I hope no one died while you resolved the chef issues,” she said.

“Oh, you know know. It was very dicey, not gonna lie,” he said, chuckling. “I’m glad to see you doing so well, Sephie. I was very sorry to see you leave the restaurant, but clearly you were meant for bigger and better things. Mostly convincing stubborn restaurant owners to take advantage of great offers in front of them.”

“Oh that? That’s just a normal Monday, Kevin,” she said sarcastically. One of the lawyers interrupted their conversation, pulling Kevin back for more signatures and paperwork, leaving Sephie and I alone.

I stepped closer to her. “I’m glad you decided to come, my love.”

“You’re just saying that because you can’t stop looking at my as s in this skirt,” she said as she turned away from me. “Seriously. Look at it. It looks amazing.” she said. I stepped closer to her, my lips close to her ear. “Careful, love. I’m not above bending your over the desk in my office before everyone has a chance to leave.” I heard her breath hitch. “Shi t. That backfired.” She turned to face me, her eyes showing a mix of lust and worry. “You’re so much better at this than I am,” she said. She glanced around the room, then quickly pressed her lips to mine.

I laughed quietly, brushing my cheek against her neck. I knew that feeling my facial hair on her neck turned her on, but this. time I felt her response. I groaned under my breath, causing her to look at me, somewhat surprised. She searched my eyes for a just a moment, then let out a small gasp. “You felt that too?” I nodded. “We are in so much trouble,” she said, giggling.

Chapter Two Hundred Forty-Five

Adrik

My business associates began leaving the conference room, leaving just a few, along with Armando. Sephie noticed Armando having an impassioned conversation with another associate, in Italian. I glanced at her and she immediately made herself look busy to get closer to them. I watched her get closer so she could hear, but she stayed out of sight of even Armando. The man he was talking to was more of an associate of Armando's than mine. This was the first project I'd worked with him on, so I didn't know him as well as the other men in the meeting. Armando trusted him though, so I allowed him to be brought on as an investor. He was a very wealthy man. Armando said his family had done business with him here as well as Italy.

It sounded like they were arguing, but Italians were a passionate lot, so what sounded like arguing might've just been normal, everyday conversation. It was the same for Russians. What sounded like us threatening your life was most likely completely benign. Sephie continued to listen to their conversation until they were finished. She had gathered up some papers and walked away from them, so as not to arouse suspicion when Armando and the other man left the conference room.

She walked back to me. She looked slightly tense. I went to ask her what was said and she simply shook her head. "Not here," she said in Russian. It must've been a serious conversation, then. That didn't make me happy. She must've felt my anger, because she placed her hand on my chest. "Not yet, either. It might be nothing." She smiled sweetly at me, then turned to walk toward Viktor, motioning for me to follow her.

"Viktor, can you make sure the guys come to the office once everyone is gone? And can you also make sure Armando stays away for a bit?" she asked him sweetly, still speaking Russian. I always had the impression that she thought of Viktor like a father. figure. He was the oldest of our little family, as he was a few years older than I was. She would tell the other guys what to do. She would even tell me what to do sometimes, but she always asked Viktor like she would a parental figure. It was always sweet to witness. He never denied her. None of us did. But you could see his heart melt every single time she went to him with a request.

"Of course, sestrichka. I'll have Chris and Keith distract him," Viktor responded.

"You're my favorite, Papa Bear," she said, grinning at him.

It took a few minutes for everyone to finish their conversations and leave the conference room. It took longer for them to leave the building, which meant Sephie and I had a few minutes alone in my office. While I had my own thoughts about how we could spend that time, I somehow managed to control myself.

As we waited for the guys to show up, I asked her about the conversation between Armando and his associate. She knew I didn't like surprises, so she told me what she'd overheard, taking her normal spot on the edge of my desk.

"I never caught the other man's name, but he was asking Armando about the Mexicans. He made it sound like Anthony and Lorenzo had reached a new deal with them. They still think they can bypass Trino, clearly. He also sounded like he was trying to talk Armando into switching sides, basically. That's what they were arguing about when we first heard them. Armando resisted at first, but by the end of the conversation, I couldn't tell if he was just agreeing with the guy to shut him up or if he was actually considering it. I couldn't see his face. I need to see a face to be able to get more information, but it's Armando, so I want to give him the benefit of the doubt. He doesn't like any kind of confrontation, so it's possible he was pretending to consider it just to be done with the conversation," she said. As she was talking, she had taken her heels off and stood to place them on the floor by my desk. When she stood up from bending over, I grabbed her and kissed her passionately. I felt her knees go weak, so I pulled her tighter against me, holding her up. I was almost desperate for her. My tongue forcing its way into her mouth, not giving her a chance to resist. She was momentarily surprised, but then I felt her match my passion. She knew that she could quiet my demons like no other and she was always willing to do so. My lungs finally began to protest the lack of oxygen and I had to stop.

As I caught my breath, I leaned my forehead against hers. "I need help controlling the chaos," I said.

She put one hand on my cheek, her eyes searching mine. "I think I can help. I have an idea," she said. The guys walked in, preventing her from saying more. They all had serious looks on their faces. Sephie rarely asked for all of them at once, so they knew this was important. They walked in and all took a seat. She kissed me gently once more, then walked to the door and closed it. The guys knew it was definitely serious then.

"That's not good," Misha said.

"It's potentially very bad, yes. Or it might be nothing. We don't know yet," she said as she walked back to me.

"Sephie overheard Armando talking to one of his associates after the meeting. They were speaking Italian, thinking that no one could overhear them, but Sephie got close enough to hear their conversation," I said.

"I couldn't see Armando's face though, and that's a big missing piece of whether this is potentially very bad or not bad at all,"

she said.

"What were they discussing?" Ivan asked. He was tense, just as they all were. Armando was already on thin ice with the guys because of Giana.

"I heard them talking about the Mexicans," she said. A couple of them cursed under their breath. "It sounded like Anthony and Lorenzo have struck a deal with the Mexicans, still trying to bypass Trino. I don't know the Mexicans, but they don't seem terribly smart. The other man, I don't know his name, was basically trying to convince Armando to switch sides. At first, he resisted, but by the end of the conversation, it sounded more like Mando was considering it." More cursing from the guys. "Before you get all murdery, this is where not being able to see his face comes in. We know Mando hates confrontation, so it's possible he was just pretending to agree with the guy to end the conversation. I want to give him the benefit of the doubt here, but I don't know," she said, crossing her arms.

"Are we going to wait to see if Armando comes to you with this one?" Viktor asked.

"I do want to see if he comes clean, but I'm not willing to give him very long to do it," I said. I pulled my phone from my pocket. "I think Trino needs to hear about this." I put my phone on speaker and leaned against my desk. Sephie moved next to me, doing the same.

"Jefe, que pasa?" Trino answered on the first ring.

Chapter Two Hundred Forty-Six

Adrik

“You’re not going to like this, Trino,” I said.

“I love it when you get straight to the point, lefe,” Trino said, laugh

“Sephie overheard Armando talking to one of his business associates. They were speaking Italian so they thought no one could hear them,” I said.

“Doesn’t Armando know she can understand Italian? I mean, he was there when she told me and Martin that she understands Italian. Does he have memory issues?” Trino asked.

Sephie laughed. “I stayed out of his line of sight, Trino. I can be invisible when I need to be,” she said.

He chuckled. “Miha, your talents are endless.”

“Apparently the Mexicans have reached a new deal with Anthony and Lorenzo. They’re still trying to bypass you and have convinced people that’s possible,” I said. “The other man was trying to convince Armando to switch sides.”

We all waited, trying not to laugh too loudly, as Trino went on a cursing tirade. He was nice enough to pull the phone away from his mouth, but we could still clearly hear him. When he finally got himself under control, he asked, “and what of Armando?”

“I don’t know the answer to that one, Trino. He resisted at first, but by the end of the conversation, he made it seem like he was. considering it. But it’s Armando. He doesn’t like confrontation. I also couldn’t see his face, so I can’t say for sure what he was thinking,” Sephie said.

“Puta,” Trino said, which made Sephie laugh. She looked up, realizing I didn’t understand. “He called him a bitch,” she said. quietly, still laughing about it.

“Are Anthony and Lorenzo still there, Trino?” she asked.

“Si, Miha. I just met with them yesterday. They must be negotiating with the Mexicans over the phone. They haven’t left Colombia. Not even while I was gone to meet with you. I have people watching them around the clock. The Mexicans wouldn’t dare set foot in Colombia either, so they have to be speaking over the phone. Who makes a deal like this over the phone?” Trino said. We waited for another cursing tirade to finish.

Sephie giggled. “You’re not wrong, Trino, but I think we’ve clearly established that we’re not dealing with the best and brightest here. I don’t even know the Mexicans but I can tell they’re morons if they think they can bypass you.”

“You haven’t even been in this world for very long and you already recognize this. These people were raised in this world and they think they can go around me,” Trino said.

“I’m more worried about what this will mean for the Mexicans. I don’t want to start a war between you and them,” I said.

“It could give Trino a reason to get rid of Anthony and Lorenzo, though. Trino finds out they’ve been making deals behind his back, rightfully loses his shit and impresses all of us with his dramatic flair when it comes to the death of his enemies,” Sephie said. She was smiling as she said it, as I’m sure she knew how much she was stroking Trino’s ego. “It also sends a message to anyone else that tries to bypass Trino,” she added.

Trino was quiet for a moment. “You haven’t been in this world very long and you can run shit better than I can, Miha. You’re right, though. It can take care of the problem with Anthony and Lorenzo, but I might need help with the Mexicans. They’ve been looking for a way around me for years. I wouldn’t put it past them to declare war, with or without Anthony and Lorenzo,” he said.

“We will help you as much as we can, Trino. You’ve been a huge help to us through all of this. My list of people I can trust is dwindling. You remain loyal to me, I remain loyal to you,” I said.

“I feel the same, Jefe. And also, I’m scared of your girlfriend’s wrath,” Trino said, laughing.

“I knew you were a smart man, Trino,” Sephie said.

We ended the call shortly after. Ivan chuckled, shaking his head. “Sephie, you’re becoming a genius at strategy.”

“You didn’t hear her in the meeting, Ivan,” Viktor said, laughing. “Strategy and marketing,” he said, looking proudly at her.

“Okay, the building project one was obvious, so I don’t get credit on that one. I just spelled it out plainly for them,” she said. “And the other matter is more because my patience is wearing thin. I also may have wanted to send a message to Armando in the most passive-aggressive way possible,” she said. A sly smile came across her face as she watched all the guys comprehend what she’d just said.

“I rest my case,” Ivan said.

“But it may not be the best fix, either. If Trino takes care of all the bosses that met with him, that might send the message that he’s the one that really has the power and is running things,” she said, chewing on her bottom lip as she contemplated alternative scenarios.

“Not if we take care of the bosses here at the same time,” Ivan said. “Everyone knows that Boss and Trino have a great relationship. This only serves to strengthen that. Essentially, they’re trying to oust both Trino and Boss with this move. Everyone in the city, with the exception of maybe Mando, will go along with Anthony and Lorenzo. It’s a move against Boss, but it’s a move against Trino if they make a deal with the Mexicans.”

“Trino takes care of the bosses down there, we take care of the ones up here, then everyone gets the message never to try this again,” Viktor said. “You have a solid plan, Sephie. Don’t doubt your first instinct.”

“Add in the doctor and the brawn operation to this equation. The people of the city also get the message that Boss won’t stand for that and is doing everything he can to protect the people of the city. Win-win,” Stephen said.

1 glanced at Sephie, who met my gaze, but we both immediately looked to Misha for confirmation. He had the faraway look in his eye, but looked at both of us shortly after. “Oh, it’s a go.” His upper body shuddered. “Yep, definite go.”

Sephie laughed at Misha’s response. “I like it when it’s strong enough I can see it, Misha.”

“I might also have the cherry on top for all this,” Stephen said. He was trying not to smile when he said it, but a devious grin stretched across his face. We all looked toward him, curious as to what else he could add. “I was in the gym with Keith last night when they got back from Armando’s house. It seems Giana has a problem,” he said, tapping the side of his nose.

“How does Keith know that?” Ivan asked.

“He’s been suspecting she has a problem for a while now. She dropped her bag at some point, spilling the contents, and a very suspicious vial of white powder fell out. Keith saw it as he was helping her gather her things from the ground. She grabbed it from his view quickly. He didn’t say anything about it, but he’s been keeping an eye on her since. She’s not supposed to go to the lobby by herself, but he said she has been. He started to suspect that she was. He said she would say she was going to Ms. Jackson’s apartment, then she would sneak to the lobby. He caught her once, but she didn’t see him. He asked the guys in the lobby to let him know anytime she was down there and what she was doing. Apparently, she meets a guy in the lobby, gets at package from him or a food container or something that looks innocent enough and would need to be paid for, then goes back upstairs. Since the guys downstairs didn’t know she wasn’t supposed to be in the lobby by herself, they never paid super close attention. After Keith started asking questions, they went back over the security footage She ditches whatever container she gets before she gets on the elevator, after she removes something from it. You can’t tell what I is on the footage, but it’s small enough to put it in her pocket. She meets this guy like clockwork, wice a week. Always the same guy. Always the same time,” Stephen said.

“Okay, so for one? RUDE. But it explains why she would accuse me of being an addict. People always accuse others of what they’re doing. And two? Just to play Devil’s advocate here, what if it’s not just drugs she’s getting from this dude? What else could she be getting from him? What else could she be giving him? Why do I sound like a completely paranoid person right. now?” Sephie said, chewing on her lip.

Ivan cracked his knuckles. “I love a good mystery,” he said, grinning. “This could actually be fun.”

“I’m almost scared to ask where your mind is going on this one, Super Squish,” Sephie said.

“Pickpocketing is a highly underrated skill, princess. He doesn’t even need to know we know who he is. She doesn’t need to know we’re on to her, either. We get our answers and they’re not any wiser,” Ivan said.

“Devious. Efficient. Orchestrated. Choreographed, even. I’ll allow it,” she said, grinning at Ivan. He simply looked at Misha, who thought for a minute, then nodded in agreement.

“Yoden, do you know when that guy will be here next?” she asked. I feel like this is going to be a present for me. I need to know how long I have to wait for it.” I laughed at her, putting my arm around her, and pulling her to me.

“Keith said the guy comes every Tuesday and Friday. Always in the afternoon, because Glana uses the excuse of having tea with Ms. Jackson in the afternoon as her cover,” Stephen said.

“Puta,” Sephie said quietly. I couldn’t help but laugh now that I knew what that word meant.

“I completely agree. I wonder if Ms. Jackson knows she’s being used?” I asked.

“Let’s find out what’s going on for sure and then I’m happy to put a stop to that,” Ivan said. “I can’t believe she would use her as a cover for this.” He was visibly angry.

“Super Squish. You’re going to break so many hearts at the Bingo Hall once they find out about this,” Sephie said.

Right on time.

Chapter Two Hundred Forty-Seven

Sephie

Ivan, Viktor, and Misha went to the lobby that afternoon to look at the security footage of Giana meeting with the mystery man. They were hoping to be able to formulate a plan to grab everything the next afternoon so we could get answers as quickly as possible.

“You really think you can make it happen that quick?” I asked Ivan before they went downstairs.

“People are creatures of habit, princess. My guess is she does the same thing each time because it’s worked for her before. We just have to learn the pattern so we know where to interrupt it to get what we need,” he said,

I squinted my eyes at him. “I don’t know how I feel about loving your devious side this much,” I said.

Adrik asked me to stay for his first meeting of the afternoon. “You’re going to be happy you did,” he said, smirking at me. He wouldn’t give me anymore details than that.

“That means I have to put shoes back on. Is it going to be worth that?” I asked.

“I think so, but I promise to rub your feet later if you think it’s not,” he said, his eyebrow raised.

“You have excellent negotiation skills,” I said.

Stephen walked in the office as I slipped my heels back on. Vinny was behind him, along with his wife, Anna. Adrik caught my eye, with a clear “I told you” look on his face.

“Vinny!” I said.

“Ciao, bella!” he exclaimed as he opened his arms for a hug.

“And you brought your lovely wife too! How are you, Anna? It’s so good to see you again,” I said, hugging her after I hugged Vinny.

“I’m good, Sephie. It’s good to see you again, too,” she said, her sweet smile on her face.

Adrik looked at me. “You’ve met Anna before?” he asked me in Russian.

I nodded. “She owns the salon where Ms. Jackson gets her nails done. We went there first before they tortured me with shopping,” I said, still in Russian.

He smiled at the memory of that day as he extended his hand to Vinny. “Vinny, it’s good to see you again,” he said, now in English. “And you as well, Anna. Please, come. Sit,” he said, after shaking her hand as well. He sat behind his desk, while I chose to lean against the cabinet behind his desk. One downside of wearing a skirt. I couldn’t hop up on the cabinet like normal. “How’s your father, Vinny? I’ve heard his treatments have been successful and they’re seeing some improvements. Is that still the case?”

“He’s doing great, thanks to you, sir. I’m still so grateful to you for everything you’ve done for our family. I almost didn’t come today. I don’t want to bother you with one more thing, sir, but it’s…” Vinny trailed off, scratching his head. He looked stressed, as well as frightened. Anna also looked stressed.

“What’s going on, Vinny? You’re both clearly stressed out. Did something happen?” I asked, now concerned.

“It’s Anna’s salon, sir. It’s in Vito’s area of the city. He’s increased the taxes so much that we can’t afford to pay them and still be able to pay her employees and everything that comes with running a business,” Vinny said. He looked almost embarrassed about it.

I could feel Adrik’s anger rising. I hadn’t had a chance yet to tell him my trick that I figured out for controlling mine. It helped me to not feel like I was struggling against it. His anger level was rising quickly enough that I knew he was going to be struggling in exactly 2 seconds. I stood and walked behind his chair, placing my hand on his shoulder.

When I needed to control my anger, I thought about it like a living thing, almost. Smoke was the easiest thing to compare it to. I learned to visualize it first, then I learned I could control it that way. I could easily increase or decrease the amount of smoke, or anger, at will. I also knew if flames showed up, then people should generally run.

I tried thinking about Adrik’s anger the same way I thought about mine. The acupuncturist said I could take his anger, so instead of risking scaring the hell out of poor Vinny and Anna, I tried to control his anger the same way I controlled mine. It took just a second after I put my hand on his shoulder, for him to feel calmer to me. He looked up at me, a clear look of surprise on his face for just a moment before he masked it and looked back to Vinny and Anna.

“Have Vito’s guys hurt anybody? Did they damage your shop?” he asked. His anger level increased as he thought about these wonderful people being victimized by Vito’s thugs. I felt it and tried to visualize containing it the same way I did mine. He took a breath, relaxing slightly.

“They smashed a few windows this past weekend. I gave them everything I had, but it still wasn’t enough. Business has been down because crime is increasing in the area. The police can’t keep up. It’s not their fault, I know. People are becoming scared to go out for fear of getting mugged. Or worse,” Anna said.

“I wouldn’t let her open the shop after that happened, so we’re losing more money, but I don’t know what else to do. My sandwich shop is still doing well. This area of the city seems to be unaffected,” Vinny said, scratching his head again.

“Do you know of other businesses around your shop that are in the same position as you, Anna?” I asked.

She nodded her head. “Almost all of them. They all had windows smashed over the weekend. They threatened worse next time if we didn’t pay. The other businesses closed as well. The amount of money they’re demanding is completely unreasonable. There’s no way we can stay open and afford to pay what they’re asking,” Anna said.

Vinny cleared his throat. “Sir, the community members…” He looked unsure about whether he should continue.

“They’re talking about revolting against Vito, aren’t they?” I asked.

Vinny looked at me, his eyes wide. “You already know?”

Adrik said, “we’re aware. This is happening in Sal’s part of town already. We heard there was potential for Vito and Niko’s areas. of the city, but haven’t gotten confirmation about them yet.” He sighed. He looked straight at Anna. “I’m sorry they vandalized your business. I’ll pay for the repairs for all the businesses, but I want you to remain closed for the time-being. I know it’s going to be hard and I apologize for that, but I need a little time to take care of this problem. I can assure you, however, that it will be taken care of.”

“Vinny, do you know if the people in Vito’s area are organizing?” I asked.

“Yes, they are. Because Anna’s shop is in that part of town, they contacted both of us. They’re talking about revolting against Vito, just like you said, Sephie,” Vinny said.

“Do you know who’s organizing it? Are there clearly a few people in charge?” I asked.

Vinny looked at Anna. They had a silent conversation about whether they should give us that bit of information. I could see the struggle on both of their faces. They were fighting against a boss in the underworld and now the King of the underworld was asking them for information about their uprising.

“Vinny, Anna, we want to help stop this. To stop Vito. We’re on your side here. I know how difficult this must be for both of you. We’ll get the information on who is in charge if you don’t feel comfortable telling us. It’ll just be a slower process. We just want to meet with them. We’re trying to make sure there are minimal casualties in all of this. If a war between the bosses and the people breaks out, they’ll capitalize on that chaos. You don’t know what they’re already planning and believe me, you don’t want to. We want to work with the people to make sure you’re all safe while this problem is addressed,” I said.

Vinny still looked unsure, but Anna looked determined. “I can give you the names of the people in charge,” she said.

“It would help even more if you can find out if they’d be willing to meet with us,” I said. I had a thought. I looked at Adrik, asking for his phone. I texted Viktor, asking for Chen’s number. I wrote it down on a piece of paper and handed it to Anna. “He’s working for us. He’s trying to help us set up a meeting with the people in Sal’s part of the city. It’ll be better if it comes from you that we’re trying to help, rather than Ghost showing up and intimidating the hell out of everyone,” I said, smiling. I had returned my hand to his shoulder after handing Chen’s number to Anna. He simply placed his hand on top of mine, laughing softly. “I’ll let him know what’s happening and that you’ll hopefully be getting in touch with him soon. He has a direct line here and can set up a meeting. Like I said, we want to help and we want to keep the people of the city safe.”

They both looked at each other, then looked at me, then Adrik. “Thank you both. For everything.” Vinny said.

“Thank you for coming to me, Vinny. Like Sephie said, we want to help. I’m trying to ensure this happens as quietly as possible, which is why it’s taking so long. My apologies for that, but I’m trying to minimize casualties, to be frank,” Adrik said.

Vinny stood up, Anna standing after him. “We’re going to get in touch with the people organizing in Vito’s area. We’ll convince them to call this number, sir. You have my word,” Vinny said, extending his hand to Adrik, who was also now standing. Anna moved to thank Adrik and shake his hand. As we walked from behind Adrik’s desk, Vinny stopped, opening his arms for me.

*Sephie, my dear. You must come to the shop again. It’s been too long. Business has gotten slow because people aren’t guaranteed a beautiful woman when they come in,” Vinny said, laughing.

“I promise I will come soon, Vinny. But you should be careful what you wish for. I’ll make sure Anna is there at the same time and you’ll be so busy you won’t be able to see straight,” I said. Anna rolled her eyes at her husband’s comment, but smiled. sweetly at me.

“Thank you, Sephie. And please do come to the shop. If my shop is going to be closed, I’ll probably help out there more. It’ll be good to see you again,” she said.

Adrik slid his arm around my waist. “We will visit soon, Vinny. She gets cranky if it’s been too long since she’s had one of your sandwiches,” he said, making me laugh. He hugged my waist tighter, kissing my temple.

“Um, that’s true. It’s a thing,” I said, still laughing. Vinny and Anna said their goodbyes and Stephen was at the office door to escort them back to the lobby.

Chapter Two Hundred Forty-Eight

Sephie

When Stephen returned, Viktor, Ivan, and Misha were with him. Andrei joined us in the office as well.

“Why did you need Chen’s number?” Viktor asked Adrik.

“It was me. I needed it. I gave it to Anna so that the people who are organizing Vito’s area of the city against him can get in touch with Chen. I figured it was easier to just have one liaison for now,” I said.

“They’re starting to revolt in Vito’s area of the city now too?” Andrei asked.

“They’ve raised taxes so high that the businesses can’t keep up and now they’re smashing windows because nobody can afford to pay,” Adrik said.

“Papa Bear, can I borrow your phone pretty please?” I asked, making the “please” overly sweet on purpose. He took his phone from his pocket, dialing Chen’s number for me and putting it on speaker before handing me the phone. “You spoil me, my gigantic secretary,” I said.

“God help me, I hope this is Sephie,” Chen said when he answered the phone. It made me laugh.

“It’s me, Chen. Do you have a minute?” I asked.

“For you, my girl? I’ve got at least 5,” he said, laughing.

“You’re a generous public servant, Chen. So, I gave your number to someone from Vito’s area of the city. They’re trustworthy. They came to us to tell us that the same thing is happening there that’s happening in Sal’s area of the city. We’re trying to get in touch with as many of the leaders of this brewing revolt as we can. We want to make sure they know we’re on their side and want to help. We also want to make sure they don’t fu ck up our plans, if I’m being honest,” I said.

Chen laughed. “I heard that, my girl.”

“I also figured it would be easier if we had just one liaison right now, but if this gets to be too much for you, then we can like

you an assistant or something. I’ll even see if I can find a cute one for you,” I said,

hire

“It’s all good, Sephie. I can handle it for now. I’m supposed to hear from DJ today about who’s running the resistance in Sal’s area of town,” he said. He made sure to pronounce “resistance” with an obnoxious French accent.

“Laissez le bon temps rouler, Chen,” I said, laughing.

He laughed loudly. “I can’t believe you remember that. I’ll let you know when these new people call me and what I hear from D] later.”

“Thanks, Chen. You’re the best,” I said. I could still hear him laughing when I ended the call. I handed the phone back to Viktor.

“How many languages do you speak, gazelle?” Misha asked.

“I don’t actually speak French, so that one doesn’t count. Same for Spanish, I just know a few random words in both languages,” I said.

“What did you say to him?” Andrel asked, curious.

“Laissez le bon temps rouler means ‘let the good times roll.’ Chen is his surname and is short for Cheney. His family is French. He speaks it very poorly. Even worse than my Italian. But he told one of his girlfriends that he could speak French to try and impress her when they first started dating. He said he would speak gibberish to her in a French accent and then he’d always end with ‘laissez le bon temps rouler.” I started laughing. “He told her it meant that she was beautiful. She believed him, too. His terrible French got him laid. It became a joke between us after he told me about it. I just told him he was beautiful, basically,” I said, still laughing. The guys all laughed with me at my si lly story. I hadn’t realized how stressed I was getting until we all had a moment’s relief. I loved these little moments when we could all have a reprieve, fleeting as they were, from everything piling on us right now.

“What did you guys find out downstairs?” I asked.

“Just as I suspected, princess. She’s very much a creature of habit. So is the guy she meets each time. It will be easy to get what we need,” Ivan said.

“Won’t she notice the missing product, though?” I asked. I was very curious about this whole process.

“You can take what you need as well as drop off a replacement at the same time, gazelle.” Misha said.

“But how do you know for sure you’re dropping off the same stuff? You guys aren’t planning on letting her snort something she thinks is her drug of choice that’s gonna ki ll her, are you?”

Ivan pointed to Viktor, “I told you it was a good idea!” His response caused another round of much-needed uncontrollable laughter.

“Are you guys going to get it from her or have someone else she doesn’t know do it?” I asked once we gained our composure once again.

“Oh, I’m definitely doing this one,” Misha said. He was clearly still very angry with Giana over this whole mess. Maybe even more so after this revelation about her. “I can use her inability to keep herself from staring at me to my advantage. You know how easy it is for me to make her all hot and bothered just by looking at her.”

I giggled. “I do know that. I’m embarrassed for her because of that. What about the guy she meets? Who gets to pick his pockets?”

“He’ll be easy. He’s just a punk kid. We can catch him on his way out of the building,” Ivan said.

I couldn’t help but grin. “It’s like an early Christmas!” I said, clapping my hands. “Although, this could be Armando’s unraveling,

now that I think of it.”

“What do you mean, spider monkey?” Andrei asked.

“If she’s doing drugs, I don’t know how Armando is going to handle that news. He clearly loves her, but as more time goes by, I think we’re seeing the answer to the question of whether he’s going to pull her up or she’s going to pull him down. It might be too much for him at once, or it might be the wakeup call that he needs right now. I don’t know,” I said, chewing on my bottom lip.

“We should add it to the whiteboard,” Andrei said, grinning at me.

Chapter Two Hundred Forty-Nine

Sephie

I felt Adrik stir next to me the following morning. I had moved from his chest at some point during the night and gotten under the covers. I was noticing that it happened anytime I dealt with trying to keep him calm. I was usually colder than normal the T next day. He had rolled over with me and had wrapped his arms around me, pulling me tight against him. I ran my fingers. lightly over his arm that was holding me tightly. He kissed the back of my shoulder. "Good morning, solnishko," he said. He was still sleepy, so his voice was especially s*xy.

I rolled over to face him, his eyes finally opening when I kissed his lips. "You look almost as excited as I am that it's morning again," I said. He groaned, pulling me closer to him. He moved my leg over his hips, his hand rubbing my thigh lightly. I snuggled closer to him, my face in his chest.

"You're not helping me want to wake up," he said, moving his hand under his shirt I was wearing to my back. I suddenly felt an intense desire for him. He was working on talking me into morning s ex, granted. It also usually didn't take much convincing, but this was so immediate and sudden that I knew it wasn't mine. I leaned my head back so I could look at him. He opened his eyes, a smirk on his face. "That was me, if you were confused."

"Is that how you normally feel or is there something special about this morning?" I asked, curious.

"It's normal. It's probably not even half of what I usually feel for you because I'm still tired from yesterday," he said. He had closed his eyes again, his hand running up and down my back still.

"Jesus, how do you keep your hands off me?" I asked. He laughed loudly, pulling me closer to him.

"Sometimes I can't," he said. He opened his eyes, revealing their dark blue color. He only gave me a moment before I felt that same intense desire again, only magnified this time. I couldn't fight it. Not that I wanted to. My lips desperately found his. His > hands were leaving a trail of fire across my body already. I moaned, enjoying the warmth returning to my body. He stopped to look at me, a questioning look on his face.

"Your hands. It feels like they're on fire. It's amazing. Especially when I'm colder than normal," I said. He rolled onto his back, pulling me on top of him. His palm rested against my cheek, sending waves of warmth down my neck to my chest. I leaned against his hand, closing my eyes. He sat up, his lips finding mine once again. Instead of ripping his shirt off of me, like he usually did, he took his time unbuttoning his shirt while he kissed me, almost softly. Every time he touched me, I felt myself get more turned on. I couldn't fight his intense desire that I could feel, but it somehow allowed him to take his time. Where he usually felt almost frantic about needing me, he was patient with his touch. His kiss was slow, but building. He slowly slid the shirt off my shoulders, his hands covering every inch of my bare skin.

"I'm not sure what you're doing to me, but please don't stop," I said, breathlessly. My body was nothing but pleasure, just from his touch. I'd never felt anything like it before. I felt him h*ok his thumbs in my panties, ripping them off. His hands slowly slid down my thighs, then back up toward my hips. My breaths were coming faster as my body temperature increased beneath his hands. I felt his lips on my neck, causing me to moan loudly. He pushed my hips up so he could get his pants off. Instead of lowering me down on to him immediately, he kept me up so his hands could roam over my entire body. Where his hands didn't go, his mo uth did. I was completely lost in the feeling. I was putty in his hands. His mo uth left a trail of fire down my neck, following his hands. He was kissing, licking, and biting his way over my body. Each time I felt his skin against mine, it was like a new fire was started in that spot on my body.

It felt like I was already almost over the edge and about to o*gasm. I was desperate to feel him inside me. "Please," I said, trying to catch my breath. "I need you." I was sure he was going to be quick about it, but he grabbed my hips and pushed me down on him slowly, like it was the first time and he didn't want to hurt me. As soon as he was all the way inside me, I felt my o*gasm start. I pushed my hips, down onto him hard, trying to ride the intense waves of pleasure I was feeling. I leaned my head back, grabbing onto his shoulders, unable to do much of anything except writhe in pleasure in his lap. He slid his hand between my breasts and left it there, bringing on a new wave of pleasure. It was so intense that I dug my nails into his shoulders. I felt like I couldn't hang on, even though he was barely moving. I heard him Inhale sharply when I dug my nails into his shoulder. His hand slid up my chest to the back of my neck. He grabbed a fistful of hair and pulled me to him. His lips crashed into mine. He was now desperate for me.

His restraint was quickly disappearing. He wrapped one arm around my hips, pushing me down onto him harder while increasing the rhythm. I could feel his pleasure building with each thrust, just as mine was building once again. I kissed him hard, pressing my body to his, my arms tight around his shoulders. He exhaled loudly and I knew he was close. My hands roamed over his muscled back and shoulders. I was trying to make him feel the intense pleasure that his hands were still giving me as I explored his body. I leaned back slightly so my hands could roam over his chest as I continued to ride him hard. I caught a look of surprise as my hand passed over his chest, in the same spot that made my o*gasms so much more intense. I left my hand there, feeling his heart rate increase, as well as his breathing. I knew it was his undoing. He pushed me over the edge one last time before I felt him explode inside me, his arms pulling me tightly against him, desperate to keep me as close as possible. He held me tightly for a few minutes, like he was almost afraid to move. I clung to him just as tightly, trying to catch my own breath.

"Holy shi t, Sephie, is that what you feel every time?" he asked.

"Which part?" I asked, giggling.

"The end."

"Yeah, that's mostly normal, although it was way more intense this time. The beginning was not normal. I've never felt that before. I'm guessing it was good for you?" I asked, leaning my head back to try and see his face. He loosened his grip on me enough that I could lean back slightly.

He took a deep breath in. "That was amazing. I've never felt anything that intense before."

I kissed his lips gently. "I can say the same thing. You made me almost have an o*gasm just by touching me."

"Really?"

"Yeah, you probably would have if I hadn't gotten greedy," I said, grinning. He ran his hand up to the back of my neck, grabbing my hair and kissing me deeply. "I like it when you're greedy. You're always allowed to be greedy," he said, smiling against my lips.

He inhaled again, moving to lay down. He opened his arms for me so I could lay across his chest. "Aren't we supposed to be getting up?" I asked as I settled in on his chest.

"Not after that. I'm still not convinced my legs are going to work if I try to stand up right now," he said, his hand running through my hair. I could feel the goosebumps rise over my entire body. I snuggled closer to him, laughing. "I might not be able to think about anything else for the rest of the day," he said.

"I have no regrets," I said, resting my chin on his chest so I could look at him. His handsome smile stretched across his face, which made me smile back at him.

"I love you so much, Persephone. I told you that you have my heart, but I think that wasn't exactly true," he said. He brushed a stray curl from my face. "You are my heart. For without you, I would cease to exist."

Chapter Two Hundred Fifty

Sephie

After falling asleep again for a short time, we finally managed to drag ourselves out of bed. I was happy to stay in bed for as long as possible today, but his meetings and my early Christmas present beckoned to us.

Adrik’s schedule was quite full that afternoon, so while Viktor, Ivan, and Misha set about to ruin Giana’s day, I stayed in the penthouse with Andrei while Stephen was in charge of Adrik’s meetings.

“Why are you not in on the pickpocketing party, Bubba?” I asked him as I curled up next to him to keep myself warm. I was on my third cup of coffee of the day. It helped keep me warm as well, but I also needed help staying awake. Turns out having mind-blowing s ex first thing in the morning completely zaps all my energy.

He stretched his giant arm around my shoulders so I could lean against his torso. Since my research confirmed he was, in fact, the warmest of all the guys, he took his heating pad duties very seriously. He would happily offer his body heat anytime I needed it when Adrik wasn’t around. I think he was happy to have something that the other guys didn’t have once again. Adrik was right. Andrei loved being the closest one to me in the beginning. He’s been much happier since he was put on heater duty.

“I’m not good at it. I’m actually quite terrible at it, if I’m being honest,” he said, seriously. I sat up, turning to look at him. He was serious.

“I can’t imagine you being terrible at anything, Bubba,” I said, settling back against him once more.

“No, it’s true. I am. I get nervous and it makes it obvious that I’m trying to steal something every single time. Pickpocketing is an art,” he said.

“Why do you get nervous?”

“I don’t know. I don’t really like touching other people unless I have to.”

I laughed, trying to move away from him. “You should’ve told me this earlier. I didn’t know I’ve been torturing you.”

He laughed, pulling me back against him. “Don’t be st upid, spider monkey. You’re different. If it’s someone I know, it’s fine. You’ve always been fine. I’m not like super weird about it. I just don’t like touching strangers.”

“Whew. Glad I made the cut,” I said, giggling. “I know how you feel though. I’m not a fan of it either. It makes me secretly happy I’ll never be able to get pregnant. Have you seen how many people just randomly touch a pregnant woman’s stomach? It’s disturbing. The body count would be so high…” I said, taking another drink of coffee. His whole body shook with his laughter, which shook mine too. I almost spilled my coffee.

“Sephie…”

“Uh oh. This is serious.”

“Huh?”

“You used my name instead of calling me spider monkey. You guys only use my name when it’s serious. I feel like I’m in trouble. Don’t ever use my full name. I’ll have a panic attack,” I said, laughing.

“Spider Monkey Sephle,” he said. I could hear the smile in voice. “I know that humor is the way you deal with your trauma and I appreciate it. But I want you to know that I’ve never met anyone that I admire as much as you. It actually used to be Ivan, but you took the top spot.”

“It used to be Ivan?” I asked, curious.

I felt him nod his head. “Ivan doesn’t know this, but he was talking in his sleep one time after he got hurt. He didn’t have to go to the hospital, but years ago, even just getting hurt and having to be bandaged would send him back to fight his past. He wasn’t struggling, so the other guys didn’t wake up, but I couldn’t sleep, so I heard everything. It was just like when we were all on the plane and heard you struggling against your uncle and everything he beat into you. I don’t know all the details, obviously, but I know Ivan’s m om sent him away to some facility when he was a kid. And I know he was tortured there. But I also know it made him stronger because he got out. Just like it did for you. You’re both survivors.”

“Ivan told me his story when we were in Italy. You’ve got the basics of it. Why did you never tell him that you know?”

“Ivan’s private. He’s opened up more since you’ve been around. All of us have, really. But he was always so quiet before you. I wasn’t sure if it would make him angry to know that I knew, so I kept it to myself. It’s why his fighting at the hospital never bothered me. It would take all of us to hold him down. Viktor struggles with taking it personally. The other guys do too, just not as much. Adrik doesn’t. I think he knows what happened to Ivan too. But I heard the pain in his voice that night when I heard him talking in his sleep. He’s haunted by it, but he still shows up every single day. If that’s not the definition of courage, I don’t know what is.” He sighed. “You’re the same. You’ve been through so much and you still show up every single day, making sure everyone around you is happy, despite carrying the enormous pain of your past. I don’t know how you do it, honestly, but I admire the he ll out of both of you for it,” he said, pulling me back against him and kissing the top of my head.

bba, you’re gonna make me all weepy,” I said, sniffling.

“I just wanted you to know, Sephie,” he said, hugging me tighter to him. We heard the door to the penthouse open and close. I’ quickly wiped the stray tears from my eyes, looking to see who was coming in. It was Misha, Viktor, and Ivan. Misha and Ivan both had shi t-eating grins on their faces. “Oh, this is gonna be good,” I said, unable to contain my excitement.

Viktor had a small kit with him that he set down on the coffee table. “What’s that?” I asked, as 1 leaned forward to put my now empty coffee cup on the table.

“It’s a drug test kit. It’ll tell us for sure what she’s on,” Viktor said.

“Scientific,” I said, leaning back against Andrei once more.

“And what about the guy? Does she give him anything other than money?” Andrei asked.

Ivan pulled a roll of money out of his pocket. It was rolled tight, so it would be easy to hand off. “Let’s find out together,” he said, smiling, as he started to unroll the money. As he did that, Misha handed the small vial of powder to Viktor, who had set up his experiment on the table.

“I feel like I’m in science class again,” I said, waiting for the results. Viktor put a small amount of the powder into another container with liquid already in it. He swirled it around. “What’s it supposed to do? Should I duck?” I was curious how this worked.

Viktor laughed. “No explosions. Andrei is the expert at that anyway, so you’re safe. It changes color,” he said as he held it up to the light. As he did, the once clear liquid turned a dark blue, almost purple color.

Does that mean it’s a girl or a boy?” I asked, not able to contain my laughter. They all laughed.

“It means she’s a coke addict, sestrichka,” Viktor said, still laughing.

Ivan pulled a small sheet of paper from in between two of the hundred-dollar bills in the roll. He looked at it, but then handed it to me. “It’s in Italian, I think,” he said. I glanced at the note, chewing on my bottom lip. I got up and went to the kitchen. I kept a small notepad in one of the drawers to write the grocery list on. I grabbed it and walked back to the couch.

The note didn’t make sense at first glance. It was four sentences that didn’t necessarily belong together. I translated them, exactly like they were written on the note.

Safe impossible, but all documents there

Walls clean in north, west, and south rooms

Fourth window from the east corner

Top of the stairs, third door on right

“Any guesses as to what she’s talking about?” I asked, after reading them what the note said. Ivan picked up the notepad, studying the sentences for a moment.

“Safe impossible. Is she talking about Armando’s safe at his house?” Misha asked.

“That’s what I thought too. Nobody is getting in that thing without Armando’s permission,” I said. “Have you guys been to his house? Do you know what any of the rest of it could mean?”

“It’s been a while since I was there. I think we should ask Keith about this,” Viktor said.

Ivan, who was still deep in thought, looked to Viktor. “Does Armando have expensive artwork at his house?”

“He does at his house in Italy, that’s for sure,” I said, remembering being completely awestruck at some of the paintings he had on his wall.

“I think she’s planning on robbing him,” Ivan said, running his hand over his goatee.

Chapter Two Hundred Fifty-One

Sephie

“But why though? She has all the money she could ever want from him. Her family as well. Didn’t Mando say she’s from a wealthy family? That doesn’t make sense,” I said.

They all thought for a moment, then Viktor stood up. “I have an idea,” he said. “But I need a computer so we have to go

downstairs.”

I jumped up from the couch. “Permission slips signed. We’re going on a field trip! Everybody make sure you grab your buddy’s hand and stay with the group.”

They were all still laughing at my caffeine-fueled absurdity when we walked off the elevator. The office was still busy, even though it was getting to be later in the day. Adrik’s office door was closed, so I knew he was in a meeting. Stephen was waiting outside his office and gave us all a curious look as we walked off the elevator.

I looked to Viktor. “I’ll go fill Stephen in. You guys go do whatever the he ll it is you’re about to do,” I said. “Just don’t lose your buddy. I’m trusting you guys to be mature on this field trip. Remember, look with your eyes, not your hands,” I said, pointing to my eyes and then to all of them.

They all shook their heads as they walked toward their desks. They each kept a desk on the floor. It made taking care of their individual responsibilities easier. Stephen’s devilish grin greeted me. “Why do I have a feeling whatever you’re about to tell me is going to make me very happy?”

“Because you’re a vampire and you likely read my mind as I was walking over here. Get. Out. Of. My. Head,” I said, smacking his shoulder with each word.

“What did you guys find?” he asked in Russian, since there were still plenty of people milling around the office.

It’s

“Well, she’s a coke addict, so there’s that. Honestly, I don’t feel as elated as I was hoping I was going to feel about that one. just sad, really.” I looked down at the floor for a moment, thinking about how empty she was to turn to drugs to try and fill whatever void she was feeling in her life. Stephen cleared his throat quietly, snapping me back to reality. “Anyway, moving on. She also slipped her dealer a note with the money. We’re trying to figure out what the hel l it means, but we think she’s planning on robbing Armando’s house.”

“Doesn’t she come from money?” Stephen asked. His brow furrowed like it always did when he was deep in thought.

“That’s the confusing part. Viktor said he had an idea, which is why we’re taking a field trip down here. I’m not sure what he’s thinking. We also might need to talk to Keith about this later. She was weirdly specific on locations. We think she’s talking about Mando’s house, but the guys said it’s been a while since they were there and don’t really remember the layout,” I said.

Stephen’s watch beeped once. He looked at it, then looked at me. “Meeting is almost over, but I’ll be back.”

“Does he have anything directly after this one? Can I surprise him?” I asked.

Before he opened the door, he smiled at me. “That would be exactly what he needs today,” he said quietly.

I moved a few steps away from the door, in case Adrik followed the person he was meeting with to the door. I waited until Stephen walked out with the person and walked past me. I heard the door to Adrik’s private bathroom open and close, 50 I knew I could sneak into his office without him seeing me. I walked in quickly, shutting the door behind me and sat down in his chair as quietly as I could. For once, the chair didn’t squeak. I propped my legs up on his desk and crossed my arms, waiting for him to come out of the bathroom.

I glanced at the few papers oh his desk, as I heard the water in the sink come on. They were rough sketches, different variations on the same theme. I couldn’t tell what it was, but my attention was directed at the door to the bathroom as I heard the water turn off.

He opened the door, not exactly paying attention. He looked completely lost in thought and somewhat stressed. His gaze lifted as he took steps toward his desk and landed on me. He stopped in his tracks, his wide smile across his face. He just pointed to me and then pointed to the floor in front of him.

I jumped out of his chair and ran to him, jumping into his arms and wrapping my legs around him. I couldn’t help the squeal that came out when he caught me. He held me tightly, his face buried in my neck. “You have no idea how much I needed this, solnishko,” he said, inhaling deeply. I felt his body relax as I hugged him tighter, running my hand through the back of his hair.

“Anything wrong or just a long day?” I asked.

“Just a long day. I’m exhausted. I don’t know how you have so much energy right now. I think you su cked all my energy out this morning,” he said. I could feel his smile against my neck as he kissed my neck sweetly.

“I’m on my third cup of coffee today. That’s how. It’s fake energy. I’m still not entirely sure what we did this morning, but it took a lot out of both of us, I think.”

“Worth it,” he said, leaning back to look at me. His handsome smile pulling at my chest.

“I could not agree more,” I said, unwrapping myself from him so he wouldn’t be forced to hold me up. “And also, I’ll go get you some coffee before your next meeting.”

He leaned down and kissed me, his hand on my cheek. His thumb rubbing across my cheek lightly as his lips were on mine. He could make my knees go weak with his kisses, and he did regularly. I think he enjoyed it. But the sweet, tender kisses almost always caught me off-guard and made my insides melt completely. I couldn’t help but moan quietly as I wrapped my arms around his neck, deepening the kiss.

“I just love you, Adrik,” I said. “Now, let me go get you coffee before your next meeting. How much time do I have?” I asked. He looked at his watch. “Ten minutes,” he said, laughing at me.

“I can do it in seven,” I said, turning to quickly walk out.

Misha was almost to Adrik’s office door when I opened the door. “Gazelle, I was just coming to get you. You need to see what we found,” he said.

I grabbed his arm, pulling him with me. I knew Adrik wouldn’t be happy about me going anywhere by myself, so since Misha was the closest one, he got nominated to come with me. I also still refused to keep track of a key fob to the elevator, so 1 needed one of the guys to operate it. “Um, where are we going?” he asked as we got on the elevator.

“To get more coffee before his next meeting. I’m on my third cup today and I’m still exhausted. He hasn’t had any since this morning, so he’s dying. I only have seven minutes to make this happen. Really, ten, but I’m an overachiever and I told him I could do it in seven,” I said.

Misha just laughed at me. The doors opened and I practically ran into the penthouse. Luckily, Adrik had a top-of-the-line coffee machine that made it quickly, so I was hopeful I could make this happen. Misha filled me in on what they’d found as I waited.

“Viktor decided to look up Glana’s family In Italy. I didn’t even know he knew her family name, but I shouldn’t be surprised. He knows everything. About everyone. Anyway, her family was wealthy,” he said. He paused for a moment, a grin on his face.

“Was? As in past tense?”

He nodded. “They’ve hit hard times recently. Apparently Giana’s father is not the businessman her grandfather was. It looks like bad investments, even more st upid investments, and generally wasteful spending have significantly depleted their fortune.”

“That explains why Giana needs a job,” I said. Misha looked at me, a confused look on his face. “Giana told me when her and Armando first got here that she needs this job. It was before I knew she came from a wealthy family, so I didn’t think anything of it.” I chewed on my bottom lip as I poured coffee into two thermoses. Might as well make it four cups of coffee today, since it looks like it’s going to be an extra long day. I finished making Adrik’s coffee just how he liked it, as well as mine and walked toward the door. Misha opened the door for me. We were both still deep in thought as we waited for the elevator.

Once on the elevator, with the doors closed, I said, “I wonder if she’s planning on robbing him for herself or for her family? It still doesn’t really make sense. I mean, all site would have to do is talk to Armando and tell him that her family is in trouble. He’s so stinking nice that he would help them. Why is she choosing to go this route?”

“I’m not sure about that one, either. There’s probably more that we haven’t found yet,” Misha said.

“I’ll be over in a minute, once I drop this off,” I said, walking toward Adrik’s office. Misha walked back toward the other three guys. Stephen had just walked out of his office as I got to the door. “Shi t, is his meeting already here?” I asked.

Stephen laughed. “Yes, but he’s early. You can still go in, he won’t care.”

I sighed, thinking I took longer than seven minutes. “Hold this. I’ll be right back.” I handed my coffee to Stephen and walked. into the office.

Adrik smiled at me, looking at his watch. “Six and a half minutes,” he said in Russian.

“Really? I thought for sure I took longer since your meeting was already here,” I said, glancing at the man who had taken a seat. in front of Adrik’s desk. Adrik stood up, walking to me. He gladly took the coffee from me, kissing my forehead. “Thank you, solnishko. You’re a lifesaver.” I grinned at him, excusing myself quickly so he could get on with his meeting.

Chapter Two Hundred Fifty-Two

Sephie

When I walked back outside, Stephen was waiting, my coffee still in hand. “Can you come to Viktor’s desk or you have to wait here?”

“There’s no way I’m not coming. My watch will tell me when the meeting is almost over. Plus, the door is open, so I can see if they get done early.”

“You’re so efficient, Yoden,” I said as we walked to the rest of the guys. “Somebody fill in Yoden while I shove more caffeine into my system,” I said, taking a drink of yet more coffee.

They filled in Stephen on everything we knew so far. Viktor had continued to dig while Misha and I were upstairs getting liquid energy for me and Adrik. “It looks like one of the deals her father made that lost him a substantial amount of money was with Armando,” Viktor said.

“Do you know what happened? Like why the deal went wrong?” I asked.

“No, I can’t tell from this. It’s in Italian, so we need you to translate,” he said, turning his laptop toward me. It was a news article from years ago, showing a picture of a much younger Armando, along with three other men. One of the men was Giana’s father. I didn’t recognize the names of the other two, but one of the men looked vaguely familiar.

I scanned the article, loosely translating as I went. My poor tired brain was having trouble translating from Italian to English back to Russian. “Um, it says…development deal…housing…four investors…approval still pending…three investors backed out…unknown reasons…final investor was Giana’s father. It looks like he tried to fund the project all on his own and it fell through. He couldn’t recover his money and lost a substantial amount.”

“I would be willing to bet she’s planning on robbing Armando to try and recoup some of the money her father lost in that deal. Especially if what we’re thinking about the artwork is true,” Ivan said.

“Artwork?” Stephen asked.

“There was a line in the note she slipped her dealer about clean wills in three locations of the house. Sephie remembered his extensive art collection at his house in Italy. If he has the same here, she’s likely giving them instructions on which pieces to take,” Ivan said.

“Keith would know,” Stephen said. “Armando is always done for the day well before Boss is. He’ll be free once Boss is done and we can ask him.”

“How many more meetings does he have today?” I asked.

“Two more after this one is done.”

“He might need more coffee,” I said, mostly to myself.

“Are you two not sleeping at night?” Andrei asked, a devilish grin on his face. “Wait, no. I don’t need to know.”

I laughed. “We are sleeping, thank you very much. It’s this weird shi t that’s happening with being able to feel each other’s emotions. I’m not complaining. It’s amazing. But it zapped us both this morning. Like completely.”

“One mystery at a time,” Ivan said. “But I can call the acupuncturist if you need her again.”

“We might,” I said thoughtfully. Stephen’s watch beeped, signaling the end of the meeting. I walked back to the office with him, hoping to take Adrik’s mind off everything in between his last few meetings of the day.

He looked even more stressed than he had earlier when I walked in his office this time. “Whoa. What happened in that meeting?” I asked.

He smiled, relaxing slightly. “It’s okay, love. Just lots of details. It’s more difficult when I’m tired.”

I walked to his chair, leaning over his shoulder to put my coffee on his desk. “Feeling your breasts on my shoulder does not hurt, though,” he said, cutting his eyes up at me.

“I’ll just come in here between your meetings and put my boobies on your shoulder, then leave when your next meeting arrives.” I said, laughing. I stood behind him, rubbing his shoulders. He was tense. He leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes.

“That feels amazing,” he said. I worked on getting his muscles to relax while he had a moment of peace. He opened his eyes, looking up at me, curious. “Why are you all down here? 1 didn’t expect to see you until I got done for the day,” he asked.

“As Ivan put it, we’re working on a mystery,” I said, chuckling at his expression. “They got interesting information on their afternoon excursion in the lobby. We’re trying to figure it all out, but you don’t need to worry about any of it until you’re done for the day.” I leaned down, pressing my lips to his gently. I heard the elevator doors ding, knowing his next meeting was arriving. “Let me know if you need more coffee to get through your last two meetings. I’ll happily be your personal barista,” 1 said, grinning at him. He grabbed my hand, kissing the back of it. “What would I do without you,” he said wistfully as his next meeting walked into his office.

Viktor and Ivan kept trying to dig up information on Giana’s family while we waited on Adrik to finish his last meeting of the day. I turned to Stephen. “Give me 20 minutes after his last meeting is done and then have Keith come to the office. He has a very short fuse right now, so he needs at least a short break before we throw more shi t on the pile.” Stephen nodded, smiling slightly.

As the last meeting ended, I walked into Adrik’s office while Stephen escorted the man downstairs. I walked in quietly, closing the door behind me. He raised an eyebrow at me and sat back in his chair. I could feel his di rty thoughts.

“I asked them to give us 20 minutes. We both know that’s not nearly enough time for what you’re thinking about right now,” I said.

“Don’t shatter my dreams,” he said, laughing at me. He stood up and met me halfway between his desk and the door. He pulled me to him. His hands were gentle, but firm, like he was fighting giving in to his true desires in that moment. I could feel the same intense need for him that I felt that morning. It came on just as suddenly, so I was sure it was him this time.

I wrapped my arms around his neck as he buried his face in my neck once again. “I’m going to need soooooo much coffee, aren’t I?” I asked him. He laughed quietly.

“I have been telling you I was addicted to you, so you shouldn’t be surprised,” he said. He stood up straight so he could look at me. His fingers resumed the everlasting battle with the curls around my face. He looked more relaxed as we stood there,

“Fair point. I’m not complaining either, for the record. I love what’s happening. I don’t understand it, but I fu cking love it. And I fu cking love you,” I said. His handsome smile stretched across his face. He rested his hand against my cheek, looking at me for a moment before leaning down to kiss me. “You always know exactly what I need to hear, my love,” he said. I felt a strong pull In my chest as he smiled at me.

“Do you get like a pull in your chest when I smile at you?” I asked. He chuckled. “Every single time,” he said.

“That’s where that’s coming from,” I said, thinking out loud. I looked up at him once more, grinning. “I really had no clue of the effect I’ve had on you this whole time. Now that I can feel what you feel some of the time, it makes me admire your high levels of self-restraint. It’s really felt like this for you since the beginning?” I asked.

Chapter Two Hundred Fifty-Three

Sephie

He nodded his head. “Since the first time I touched you, I’ve felt a pull back toward you every time we’re apart. When you smile at me, I either feel that pull in my chest that I’m guessing you’re feeling right now or it feels like my heart stops. When you’re sad or upset, sometimes I feel that pull in my chest too. Sometimes it’s stronger when you’re upset, like my heart is demanding I destroy whatever is making you upset.” His eyes got darker and I saw his jaw tense. I was suddenly hit with a wave of sadness. He closed his eyes, preventing me from finding out why. He sighed. “It was especially bad after the ball, when we were on the plane and you wouldn’t let anyone touch you. That pull toward you was so strong, because I just wanted to make you feel better and I couldn’t. I also knew you were upset, on top of being hurt. It felt like there was a hole in my chest until you allowed me to touch you again.” He opened his eyes and I saw the regret he still carried over that whole situation. I felt the tears welling in my eyes as I saw him struggling with the memory of what happened.

“Adrik,” I said. I put both of my hands on either side of his face, so he would look at me. “You don’t need to keep carrying this guilt over what happened. It ultimately worked out for the best and I got a kickass scar out of it, to boot,” I said smiling. I was hoping to make him laugh, but he flinched at the memory of me being hurt. I stood on my toes kissing him gently. I sighed, taking a new approach. “I think it needed to happen the way it did, Adrik. If I hadn’t gotten hurt, I wouldn’t have remembered everything about my uncle and I would’ve kept a very big part of me locked away forever. Until we were on that plane, I would still regularly hear my uncle’s voice in my head. Like he was standing next to me, still telling me all the same things he used to scream at me when he was beating me. There was a very large part of me that was terrified he would find me again and kill me. Remember the first night I spent at the house? When I had a nightmare and started shaking so bad I couldn’t control myself?” I asked. He nodded. “That was a regular occurrence. I’ve had that same nightmare so many times I last count. It just ended differently that night because of Anthony. Do you know how many times I’ve had that nightmare since the night of the ball?” He looked at me curiously, resuming all efforts to tame my curls. “Zero Limes. So, while you’re beating yourself up thinking that you put me through Hell, I’m eternally grateful to you for saving me from it. It was you, Adrik, that showed me the way out. If that night hadn’t happened, I never would’ve gotten out.” I could see the tears forming in his eyes as he listened to my words, While he felt a pull in his chest, I felt a fire building throughout my entire body. I felt that warmth building as he looked at me, looking at me with complete love in his eyes. Just to see what would happen, I concentrated on what I was feeling and then tried to push it to him.

I heard his breath hitch as his eyes widened and I knew he felt it. I grinned at him. “That’s what it’s been like for me since the beginning,” I said.

“No wonder you’re freezing when I’m not around,” he said, his sexy smirk on his face.

“That struggle is ridiculously real,” I said. We heard a soft knock on his office door. I stood on my toes again and pressed my lips to his. “That’s Stephen, I’m sure. He’s the only one with enough finesse to be able to knock that softly. You need to hear what we found out about our dearest Giana today.” I walked to the office door to open it. Stephen was there, looking somewhat unsure about whether he should’ve disturbed us or not. I laughed. “It’s good, Yoden. You guys can come in.”

He turned and motioned to all the guys to come to the office. I walked back to Adrik, who walked us both to one of the couches. He pulled me into his lap and leaned me back against his chest. I crossed my legs in between his as he wrapped his arms around me.

Both Viktor and Ivan walked in with their laptops. “We need more translations, princess,” Ivan said, handing me his computer.

Andrei and Misha walked in behind them.

Stephen said, “Keith will be here shortly. He said Armando had a late meeting, so he asked Keith to grab dinner for him and Glana.” I looked to Stephen, who had a knowing look on his face. “I agree. Weird move.” His phone beeped. He looked at the text, saying, “he’s on his way.”

It was barely one minute later that we heard the elevator doors ding to signal Keith’s arrival. He walked into the office, looking slightly nervous. I’ll give it to him. The last time he was summoned before all of us was slightly uncomfortable for him.

“Shut the door, Keith,” Adrik said. I could feel that he was enjoying fucking with Keith’s head and was not mad in the slightest. It was all I could do to not laugh. I hugged his arms tighter around me.

“What’s up?” Keith asked, sitting down in one of the chairs. He looked like he was trying to not be nervous. He was failing miserably.

“We did some investigating into Giana and her frequent excursions to the lobby unattended,” Ivan said. Keith looked surprised, but intrigued. He glanced around the room, looking at all of our faces. His face dropped slightly. “Why do I feel like this is so much worse than a drug problem?”

Chapter Two Hundred Fifty-Four

Sephie

“So, you really confirmed she’s buying drugs when she goes to the lobby?” Keith asked. It was almost like he was expecting us to tell him his suspicions were false.

“She’s apparently got a nasty little coke habit,” Misha said. He held up the vial he picked off Giana earlier that day.

Keith’s eyes went wide. “That’s what fell out of her purse that day!” he said, pointing to the vial in Misha’s hand.

“If she’s buying that much coke twice a week, she’s got to be staying high almost constantly right now. It’s likely why we haven’t seen much of her. That kind of habit eventually gets difficult to hide.” Ivan said.

“I wonder if that explains her nervousness around you guys from the beginning. I’m positive she caught on to how observant we all are right away. She’s never liked being in the same room as all of us. Hell, she’s never really liked being around us much at all, unless there’s shopping involved,” I said.

“It’s easier to hide when shopping. She can be more animated without arousing suspicion,” Andrei said.

“Have you noticed her having nosebleeds?” Ivan asked Keith.

“She’s had a couple lately. She blames the weather. She says she hates it when it gets cold,” Keith said.

“Have you seen Armando questioning her about anything? Not that he would do it in front of you, but I just wonder if he’s noticing any of this,” I asked Keith.

“I haven’t seen anything. Ever since they got into a fight about her basically accusing you of being an addict, which is really ironic now, they’ve had a strained relationship. I think they even slept in separate rooms this past weekend at least one night.. I’ve heard them arguing, but they’re always arguing in Italian so I can’t understand what they’re saying,” he said.

“It’s Italian. They could be confessing their love for each other and it would probably still sound like a heated argument,” Adrik said sarcastically.

“I’ve heard Armando arguing on the phone several times lately too. Again, always in Italian. There was one argument that got really heated, so I recorded part of it,” Keith pulled his phone out of his pocket. We all looked at him, somewhat surprised. “I don’t like not being able to understand what’s going on. I’m not being nosey, but if I’m supposed to be keeping this dude safe, then I need to know what’s going on,” he said.

“Fair point,” I said. He found the recording on his phone and turned the volume all the way up. It wasn’t the best recording, so I couldn’t hear it well enough from across the office. He tossed his phone to me so I could put it closer to my ear. It was just Armando’s voice, so he wasn’t on speaker. Not that I could’ve understood the other person on this recording. I listened to it a couple of times to make sure I was hearing it correctly. “He’s talking in very vague terms. Saying things like ‘I’ll take care of it’ and “you have to give me time. At the end he says, ‘I told you that wasn’t going to work but you wouldn’t listen to me.”” I tossed the phone back to Keith.

Adrik pulled me back against him again, hugging me tightly. He put his lips close to my ear, saying quietly, “if I haven’t told you how grateful I am to have you lately, just know I’m incredibly grateful to have you.” I felt my cheeks flush slightly. He left his cheek against mine for a few moments.

“What do we know of his business deals lately?” Ivan asked. “He could be talking about a business deal that isn’t working out the way it’s supposed to. I would like to stick with that option rather than the other option my mind came up with.”

“Do we want to know the other option?” Andrei asked.

“If he’s really considering switching sides, that could explain the first two statements. The third could be in reference to either. the ball or the explosion in Italy. Or the failed kidnapping attempt,” Ivan said. He had a habit of rubbing his hand over his goatee when he would worry,

“I see why you’d prefer to stick with the first option,” Andrei said.

Adrik felt me tense at the mention of those three events. His hands found mine and he laced his fingers through mine, keeping my arms on top of his that were wrapped around my waist. “What else did you find out about Giana this afternoon? You guys have been down here all afternoon, it can’t be just that she’s the addict among us,” Adrik asked. I was both surprised and impressed that he was remaining as calm as he was right now. His fingers lightly played with mine, sending waves of warmth up

my arms as we talked.

“She slipped a note to her dealer. We’re thinking it’s all in reference to Armando’s house, but none of us have been there recently,” Viktor said. He produced the note that I had translated earlier and handed it to Keith. “Can you make sense of any of that, in reference to his house?” he asked.

Keith studied the note. “Well, I’m sure you all know his safe is impossible. You have to have Armando to get into that thing, so that checks out.” He read the other three sentences and then read them again. “Top of the stairs, third door on the right is Armando’s room.”

“Does he keep anything special in there or is he the special thing?” I asked.

“He has a second safe in there, but it’s just like the bigger one in his office. You have to have Armando to get into it,” Keith said. He thought for a few minutes more, studying the note.

“Armando had some very pricey art on his walls in his house in Italy. Do you know if that’s the case here as well?” I asked.

I could see the light bulb turn on in Keith’s head. “That’s what that means. Look, I don’t know art. I couldn’t tell you how much these paintings are worth or even what the paintings are of, in a couple of cases, but he has the majority of paintings in these rooms on the first floor. He has a few upstairs as well, all in his room. Maybe that’s why his room is specifically pointed out. It’s really the only one with any kind of paintings in it upstairs.”

“It sounds like she’s planning an art heist,” Ivan said. “If she’s looking for maximum profit, that’s the way to go if you can’t access the safe. But stolen art is very hard to sell. Given that her family used to be wealthy, she might have connections on how to move it, but this seems well above her level of Intelligence.”

“Her family is no longer wealthy, then?” Adrik asked.

“Viktor figured it out. It didn’t make sense that she was planning on robbing Armando if she came from a wealthy family. She has all the money she could want with Armando. Why would she be trying to rob him, if not for a larger reason? When she ‘apologized’ to me, it was clear that her family still controls her,” I said.

“Her father has made some terrible business decisions since he took over from Giana’s grandfather. They’re virtually penniless now.” He pulled up the first article he found and walked over to show Adrik. “One of the biggest deals that cost him a substantial amount of money was with Armando.” Adrik looked at the picture for a moment. I could suddenly feel his anger rising quickly.

up and turned to look at him. He was still looking at the computer screen. He pointed to the man that looked vaguely llar in the picture, then looked to me. “That’s who he was arguing with yesterday after the me

“What does this article say?” he asked me.

“It was originally a huge business deal that they started before they got approval. Three investors pulled out, but it doesn’t give a reason why, and the last investor, Giana’s father, tried to fund the project on his own. He lost a ton of money. It also doesn’t give a reason why approval wasn’t granted either,” I said.

“What about the other article you haven’t seen yet?” Ivan asked, pointing to his computer. I pulled that article up and scanned it. “This one is about a fire that demolished an entire apartment building. Three people died in the fire. Firefighters were unable to put the fire out completely for three days. Um, gory details nobody wants to know about. Ah, Giana’s father owned the building,” I said.

“Could be insurance fraud,” Ivan said. “It’s an old scam.”

I searched for more articles about that building. Most were just reporting the incident, but I eventually found one that reported the ruling on the insurance claim. “I think you’re right, Super Squish. He filed an insurance claim, but they did an investigation and concluded the fire was deliberately set. According to this article, they never found who set the fire.”

“Sounds very similar to Armando’s exploding office building in Italy,” Stephen said.

“Do you think Armando was behind his own building exploding? Is he trying the same scam?” I asked. Stephen just shrugged.

his shoulders. “Follow-up question: did they have these kinds of insurance scams in the 1500s when you were just a wee

vampire of 400 years?”

Chapter Two Hundred Fifty-Five

Sephie

“Technically, I was the insurance scam. Lots of villages burned trying to get rid of me. I have a strong dislike of fire because of it,” Stephen said, completely straight-faced. We all laughed loudly. I started laughing even harder when I saw the look of confusion on Keith’s face. He was just staring at Stephen, his mo uth open in complete shock.

“I love how you just have a ‘strong dislike’ of the thing that could ki ll you,” I said, still laughing.

“If you can’t find inner peace in 900 years, are you even trying?” Andrei said, which caused another round of laughter from all of us. I was laughing so hard I was crying by the time I finally gained control of myself.

“Shi t, I needed that,” I said. “Okay, back to serious matters. Seriously, focus people.” I was making myself want to laugh again. I got up and handed Viktor’s computer back to him. “Can you please find out if Armando is also in financial trouble like you did Giana’s family?” I asked. I always felt compelled to be extra sweet when it came to asking Viktor for anything. I think it was the look on his face every time I did. He practically melted every time I asked him for anything. He got busy looking up information as I returned to Adrik’s lap.

“So, let’s just say, for the sake of argument, that Armando is having financial difficulty. He blows up his own office building for the insurance money. Why would he depend on us to stop everyone from showing up to that building that morning? He was the one that set that meeting at his building, with all his people there. We were the ones that stopped people from dying,” Misha said.

“Well, when you say it like that, it makes no sense,” I said.

“Unless that was also the plan all along. If he didn’t show, but everyone else did…” Ivan said, trailing off.

“Assuming he hasn’t found a way to alter his records, Armando is doing fine financially,” Viktor said.

“Does he own that office building?” I asked. “I mean, I would assume so, but let’s check just for fun.”

Viktor started a new search as we all waited for the results. I leaned my head back, looking sideways at Adrik. “He hasn’t said anything about the discussion he had yesterday after the meeting?”

“Not a word,” he said. “He has until tomorrow to come clean before I confront him about it.”

“Sestrichka, you might be a genius,” Viktor said. He stood up, bringing me his computer. “Make sure I’m reading this correctly, but I think this says the owner of Armando’s office building is Giana’s father.” I looked at the screen, reading through everything listed. “You’re right, Viktor. He wasn’t the owner. That hrings us back to insurance scam.”

“So, Giana’s own father tried to ki ll her?” Keith asked. “That’s some family drama.”

“Eh, maybe not. He likely knew she was habitually late. It’s also possible he knew Armando is habitually early. According to Giana’s story, the building exploded sometime between 8:00-8:15 that morning. Early enough that she wouldn’t be there. Late enough that he would,” I said. “But you are correct on the family drama.”

“This likely explains why Armando hired her to begin with. He likely feels guilty about the business deal and wanted to help her out by giving her a job. You were right, Sephie. She probably wasn’t qualified In the slightest for the Jab but he hired her anyway, Ivan said.

*Maybe they played on that guilt to get her closer to him,” Stephen said. “She’s been a plant all along.”

“I think the more pressing issue is whether Armando is loyal or if he’s playing both sides,” Adrik said. He looked to Keith. “Can you get more recordings of his conversations, especially when he’s speaking Italian? He’s more likely to slip up in front of you because he knows you can’t understand him.”

“Absolutely. He’s planning on going back to his house in two days for the weekend again. It’s easier to record him there. He also has more meetings there than he does here,” Keith said.

“Can you get pictures of who he’s meeting with?” Stephen asked.

“Between me and Chris, we should be able to,” he said. “I can send it all to you nightly so I can delete it from my phone.”

“Keith, you stay loyal to me and you’ll have a job no matter what happens to Armando,” Adrik said. “Chris, too. I reward those who stay loyal to me. You’ve seen the alternative firsthand, so I don’t need to elaborate.”

“Yes, sir,” Keith said. He stood up to leave, understanding that he was free to do so. He shot a quick glance toward Stephen before he walked out of the office.

“What happens if Armando doesn’t come clean by tomorrow?” Misha asked.

“I haven’t decided yet. I also haven’t decided how I want to tell him about this information about Giana. I would have assumed he would know about it by now. She’s spending a hefty amount of money, with nothing to show for it,” Adrik said.

I laughed. “He’s not going to notice that. I saw his ex-girlfriend’s wardrobe. He doesn’t pay attention to the money spent by his girlfriends.”

“Maybe not in the way you’re thinking, love. But if she’s spending that much money each week, there should be new clothes showing up regularly. Or something showing up in exchange for the money. She can’t go buy clothes on top of spending that amount of money because it would be too obvious. That money has to be going somewhere,” Adrik said,

“Didn’t his first wife also have the same problem?” Viktor asked.

“Uh oh,” I said.

“Uh oh what?” they all asked at once.

“That means this is a pattern and Mando is the common denominator,” I said.

“You think he’s getting them hooked? Or they’re turning to it as an escape from him?” Ivan asked.

“That’s the million-dollar question,” I said.

“The other million-dollar question is what are we ordering for dinner? I’m starving.” Andrei asked.

I caught Andrei before they all left the penthouse after dinner was over and we’d thoroughly discussed all possibilities. “I promise to make your favorite meal tomorrow for suggesting we order takeout tonight. You saved me so much work and I love you for it, Bubba.”

He pulled me into a hug. “I know you’re tired, spider monkey. We’re all tired right now. Maybe I’ll see if Misha can order Boss back to the house this weekend. I think it does all of us good to go there now,” he said.

“Devious. I love it. I’ll allow it.” 1 announced as I hugged him tighter.

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Chapter Two Hundred Fifty-Six

Sephic

Once we were alone, I grabbed Adrik's hand and pulled him back to the bedroom. He was exhausted. He looked exhausted. He felt exhausted. I turned the hot water on in the bathtub. "I know you only ever take baths when I'm hurt, but I think you should make an exception tonight."

He pulled me tight against him. "I will gladly take one, as long as you join me."

"One of us has to make sure we don't fall asleep and drown in the tub."

Once the tub was full, I ordered him in. I also managed to talk him into letting me be the big spoon, which literally never happened. "But I can't hold you if you're behind me, solnishko," he protested.

"I know. But I can hold you. You need a break, Adrik. Even if I couldn't feel what you feel now, it's written all over your face. You're exhausted. Let me take care of you the same way you're always taking care of me," I said.

He cursed under his breath as he stepped into the tub, but he moved so I could get in behind him. I tried not to laugh at him, but I couldn't help myself. "You're pretty adorable when you're tired and cranky," I said as I wrapped my legs around him. I leaned him back against me, letting him rest his head on my shoulder. My hands were running lightly over his muscles, trying to get them to relax. It took just a few minutes for him to take a deep breath and I felt him start to relax.

"Okay, so maybe you were right. This feels amazing," he said.

"I know," I said kissing his neck lightly.

He ended up relaxing so much that I really was worried he was going to fall asleep, so I had to keep talking to him to keep him. awake. "I never got a chance to tell you my idea on how to contain your anger," I said.

I felt him turn his head and look at me. "You didn't tell me, you showed me." I turned my head to look at him, surprised. "When you put your hand on my shoulder while Vinny and Anna were in my office. I could feel what you were doing. It was almost clear as day. I wanted to close my eyes to see if I could actually see what you were doing, but I didn't because they were there. I tried it tonight when we were talking about Giana and Armando. I'm thinking it worked, because I'm pretty sure you thought I was calm that whole time," he said. His smirk was undeniable on his face.

My mouth fell open. "I'm so impressed right now I don't even have words to describe how impressed I am." I thought back to earlier that evening when we were all in his office. I felt his anger just briefly, but not once after that. He really did learn how to control it so well that even I couldn't detect it. "I thought you were calm the whole time. I was actually a little worried about you, because I was sure you would be angry and then when you weren't, I thought there might be something wrong. Like maybe you were getting sick instead of just being exhausted," I said.

He chuckled, grabbing my legs and wrapping them around his waist tighter. "I don't want to talk about it too much because I know I'll get mad again, but I'm livid over this whole Armando thing. I don't take betrayal weil and Giana has already betrayed you, now with Armando…" he trailed off, not wanting to finish his thought.

"What did we do this morning?" I asked quietly. He just laughed at me. The water was starting to cool, so he tapped my legs Indicating he wanted to stand up.

"I don't know exactly, but I don't ever want it to stop," he said as he turned toward me and extended his hand to help me stand up. As soon as I was standing, he leaned down and kissed me gently. "The kind of connection we have is something I never thought was possible, but always dreamed of. You understand me on a level that no other person has," He paused, pulling me tight against him. His blue eyes were searching mine for a moment, then he added, "I've been seriously thinking about getting rid of everyone. Armando included. With you by my side, I can run the entire city myself." As he said those words, I felt goosebumps rise over my entire body. I know my eyes went a little wide, which worried him, but I was surprised by the reaction, not his statement. I lifted my arm to show him the very clear sign that he was on the right path. The smile that spread across his face was enough to stop my heart this time. He reached down, picking me up and carrying me out of the tub. "You just proved my point," he said.

The following morning, I had an idea about how to get a little more information on Giana. I knew she'd been spending a lot of time with Ms. Jackson, not just using her as a cover story. When we came back from the gym, I asked Adrik if he'd be okay with Ms. Jackson coming to the penthouse so I could talk to her without the possibility of Giana showing up,

"I'd be willing to bet Giana has made comments about Armando around Ms. Jackson. Because of Ms. Jackson's history, she knows when to keep her mouth shut, but she might tell me what's been said. She might not. She might feel closer to Giana at this point, but it's worth a try anyway," I said.

"I don't have a problem with her coming up here, as long as it's just her and nobody else," he said.

"Just her and just this once. I happen to love your love of privacy," I said, grinning at him. He had just pulled his shirt on as we were talking, so I walked over and buttoned it up for him. I looked up at him, my own dirty thoughts racing through my head. "I'm doing this wrong."

"You can fix it later," he said, a devilish grin on his face.

Chapter Two Hundred Fifty-Seven

Sephie

Viktor and Stephen were busy with their normal Master of the Schedule duties, as Adrik had another busy day. I recruited Misha, Ivan, and Andrei to help me get Ms. Jackson up to the penthouse, hopefully without Giana knowing. Since Glana used the excuse of having afternoon tea with Ms. Jackson, I wanted to have a chance to talk to her early enough in the day that she would be home should Giana stop by later.

Ivan and Andrei volunteered to go fetch her while Misha stayed in the penthouse with me. "I have to admit that I'm still angry with Ms. Jackson for setting up Giana's ambush of you," Misha said as we waited.

"I know, my adorable Russian guardian. I'm hoping that she simply wasn't aware of what was going on when she set it up, but I do plan on asking. You know how quick she is, she might've caught on when you told me we didn't have to stay," I said. He laughed, shaking his head. "What?" I asked,

"You always do that."

"Do what?"

"Give people the benefit of the doubt, second chances, third chances, 500 chances in the case of Max," Misha said, rolling his

eyes.

I thought for a moment. "I know I do. Sometimes I think it's a fault, but I refuse to see how thinking the best of someone is a bad thing. It's gotten me hurt and taken advantage of plenty of times in my life. You'd think I would've learned by now, but I just can't help myself. I still see the good parts of people. Most people."

The door to the penthouse opened and Ms. Jackson was escorted inside by Ivan and Andrei. "Child, you have fully realized your power if you've reached a point of summoning people to you now," she said, laughing.

"She didn't want to risk being ambushed again," Misha said. He had an edge to his voice that wasn't usually there, especially around her. He was definitely still angry with her. She picked up on it right away.

"I do owe you an apology for that. I had no idea there was an issue between you and Giana. She made it seem like she just wanted to spend time with you. As soon as you saw her, I knew there was an issue." She looked right at Misha. "Then when you told her she didn't need to stay, I figured out Giana must've done something. She put me right in the middle, which is not somewhere I like to be, but I was trying to make the best of it." She looked between me and Misha. "I owe you both an apology. Child, I wouldn't have called you down there if I knew that was going to happen. And you, sir, you're much too handsome to ever chastise like that. It nearly broke my heart."

It did make me feel better that she was just as ambushed as we were that day, but Misha was still mad. Slightly less mad, but still mad. Didn't detract from how adorable he was, though, so my working theory that he got away with murder as a child was still a good one.

"What happened after we left?" Andrei asked Ms. Jackson.

Ms. Jackson sighed. "I might've read that poor girl the riot act. I still don't know exactly what happened, but I gather she accused Sephle of using drugs. Spend any amount of time around that child and It's obvious she's got giant demons in her past. Those kinds of demons only show up when there's drugs involved or abuse and Sephle had both. Glana is a nice enough girl, but if I'm being honest, she's an idiot. She can't see past her own nose. I don't have a way to prove it, but I'd be willing to bet she accused Sephie of doing the exact thing she's doing."

We all looked at each other. Ms. Jackson, of course, noticed. "So, I'm right then? She's the one on drugs?" she asked. Ivan

nodded his head. "We got confirmation of it yesterday," he said.

"There would be a lot less drama in the world if people would just figure out that others will always accuse you of what they're afraid of you finding out they're doing." Ms. Jackson said. She thought for a moment, then looked to me. "I'm guessing there's more to it than just her killing herself slowly? I can't imagine you needing to summon me for just that."

I smiled at her. She really was a very sharp woman. "Has she talked to you much about Armando?"

"Little bits here and there. Their relationship hasn't been that great lately. She said he's been arguing with her a lot lately, but I'm guessing it has to do with her needing to apologize to Sephie. Armando, to his credit, has been trying to help her grow up. She did tell me that her father lost a substantial amount of money because of Armando. She said it happened years ago, but Armando still feels bad about it. It's why she got the job as his assistant. That girl can barely assist herself. She said she didn't even know how to use a computer when he hired her. He's taught her everything."

I looked to Ivan. Stephen was right. She's likely been a plant all along. Since Ms. Jackson could understand Russian, I couldn't say anything, so I chose to curse in Italian instead.

"That reminds me, child. Since when do you know Italian?" she asked me.

"It's not important," Ivan said abruptly. Maybe Misha isn't the only one still slightly angry with Ms. Jackson.

"What about her family? Does she talk about them at all?" I asked, trying to steer the conversation away from me.

"She's mentioned them a few times, but never in a good light. She told me her family was wealthy, but they're controlling. She said her father still tries to control her life, even though he's in Italy and she's here. Not much else that I can remember. She's been unhappy since she got here. She wants to go back to Italy, but it also sounds like she was unhappy when she was in Italy," she said.

"She's going to be unhappy wherever she goes until she learns that she's the one responsible for her own happiness," I said. "Are they making any plans to go back to Italy? Has she said?"

Ms. Jackson nodded her head. "She told me at the end of the month, that she would be gone for a few weeks. She said she finally talked him into taking her back to Italy. She apparently hates the cold and wants to go somewhere warmer." We all exchanged glances. If she was planning on robbing Armando, that must be when she was planning on doing it.

"Do you spend much time with Armando?" I asked.

"I do see him occasionally. We sometimes have dinner together with Mr. Turner," she said.

"Do you get the impression he knows she's on drugs?" I asked. I was still trying to figure out if Armando was choosing to ignore it or if he really was that stupid.

"If he doesn't at least suspect it, then he might be the dumbest man I've ever known. Even Mr. Turner picked up on the fact that she was on drugs. The last two times we've had dinner, she's been so high she can either barely function or she won't shut up the whole time. There's not a lot of in between with her. Mr. Turner said there's a kid who's a dealer that comes to his hotel frequently. He's seen the kid in the lobby here a few times, but never with Giana, so he can't say he's her dealer."

"He's her dealer," Ivan said.

"Ms. Jackson, I want you and Mr. Turner to be careful with Giana. This is much bigger than just a drug problem. I know you both know how to take care of yourselves, but a little distance between both Armando and Gilana is probably a good thing right now. She's been using you as cover to get away from her security guys, too," I said.

"I knew she did it once, but I didn't know she was still doing that," she said. She thought for a moment. "The perks of getting older mean I can fake an illness as much as I want and nobody will question it. I feel a cold coming on the next time they want to have dinner," she said, matter-of-factly.

"If you hear of anything else that seems out of the ordinary when it comes to either one of them, will you tell me right away?" I asked. "I know you default to keeping your mouth shut, but this has the potential to be bad."

"Of course, child. You know I'll never turn down a reason to call one of your eye candies."

Chapter Two Hundred Fifty-Eight

Adrik

I found my mind wandering during the afternoon's meetings. I slept great the night before, thanks to Sephie forcing me to take a bath with her before bed. I still couldn't get over her reaction to me telling her that I was thinking of getting rid of the other bosses and running things on my own.

It was something my father had tried when I was much younger. It t was one of the reasons I had multiple attempts made on my life before the age of 10. My father eventually relented and divided the city between the six bosses that were now trying to usurp me. Relations had been mostly good throughout the years between my father and the other bosses. Then, when I took over, things had been quiet until this year. The city was thriving and the bosses were thriving, so it didn't make sense that they were trying to grab more power from me. Greed does strange things to people.

My mind kept returning to the thought of running the entire city with Sephie by my side. I would finally realize what my father had tried to do so many years ago. And do it in a way that would 'save the people of the city, rather than sacrifice them as collateral damage.

My last meeting of the day was over. When Stephen returned to my office, I could tell by the look on his face that I was not going to like what he was about to tell me. "Boss, I just heard from Keith. Armando left early for his house, with Giana. Keith said he moved all his meetings there for tomorrow instead of staying here."

I inhaled deeply. While it didn't make me happy that he had chosen to not come clean with me, it did mean that we would get a chance to listen to more of his meetings, since Keith would have an easier time recording him at the house.

Viktor walked into the office. "Chen called. I told him Sephie would call him back in 5 minutes. Do you want to go upstairs or should have her come down here?"

"I'll go up. I need a change of scenery. She promised Andrei she would cook his favorite meal tonight since he saved her from having to cook yesterday. She's likely busy anyway," I said. My stress from the day already starting to subside at the thought of having her in my arms.

Viktor's smile made it clear he was happy about this news. He really did love it love it when Sephie cooked. We all did, but for some reason, it was an extra special treat for Viktor. "Apparently, I owe Andrei one," Viktor said as we walked to the elevator. I raised an eyebrow at him. "Andrei's favorite happens to be mine as well," he said. He was practically drooling as he thought. about it. We really had become quite spoiled with her cooking for us. Even takeout didn't taste as good anymore.

As soon as we opened the door to the penthouse, we could smell her cooking. My stomach growled in anticipation. Viktor laughed, as he'd heard it. "At least I'm not the only one overly excited about this," he said as we walked in. Sephie saw us, her eyes landing on me quickly. Her smile made the room even brighter. She had her hands full, so she couldn't drop everything and come to me the way I'd grown to adore. Instead, I went to her, standing behind her while she finished what she was doing. I leaned down, pressing my cheek to her neck, my hands on her hips, kissing her lightly. She freed up one hand and pressed her palm to my cheek for a moment before returning to what she was doing.

"Sestrichka, Chen called earlier. I told him you'd call him back in a few minutes. Can you talk now or should I tell him a few more minutes?" Viktor asked him.

"If someone can hold the phone for me, I can talk to him now. These raviolis aren't going to stuff themselves, Papa Bear," she said smiling at him. He dialed the number, putting it on speaker, then handed me the phone to hold for her.

"Yay, teamwork," she said giggling as we waited for Chen to pick up.

"How did you call exactly 5 minutes later? Like were you guys Just fu cking with me and making me wait 5 minutes for no good reason?" Chen asked when he picked up the call.

Sephie laughed at him. "No, Chen. They had to find me. Sometimes I play hide and seek to keep them on their toes. You know, ongoing training and what not," she said. We all laughed quietly.

"For real?" Chen asked. He clearly believed her.

"Oh, totally. I once climbed out one of the windows onto the ledge. Took them 6 hours to find me. Most peaceful day I've had in a long time," she said. There was silence on the other end. She couldn't contain her laughter any longer. "No, Chen. I'm only messing with you."

"At this point, I put nothing past you," he said.

"What do you have for me, my favorite French person?" she asked.

"I did hear from the people in Vito's area of the city. They're down to meet. They said name the place and time and they'll be there. DJ finally got back to me. He apologized for the delay, but he said one of his kids has been really si ck. The people in charge in Sal's area of the city are also down to meet. I don't know if you guys want two separate meetings or you want to combine them, but let me know when and where. I'll make sure everyone knows," he said.

"You're such a professional public servant, Chen." She glanced at the guys, then tried to turn around far enough to look at me. I surprised her by kissing her cheek. I looked at Ivan, who was holding up one finger, as was Viktor. I nodded in agreement and looked to Misha, who confirmed meeting with everyone at once would be fine. Sephie saw everything and responded to Chen. "We can meet with everyone at once. Same as last time, we'll get in touch about when and where. Thank you, once again, for being our go-between," Sephie said.

"You got it, my girl. Hey, I talked to Max last night. I stopped by the restaurant. He told me what happened. Well, most of it. I'm pretty sure his du mbass left out some important details. I don't know everything about your relationship with him, but you did the right thing. Sephie. You were always a way better friend to him than he was to you," he said.

It took her a second to respond, but she thanked him and the call ended. I handed Viktor his phone back, my hands once again moving to her hips. I felt her sigh quietly as she continued what she was doing. I kissed her neck, whispering "I love you" in her ear. She leaned her body back against me, leaning her head on mine.

"It's less likely that anyone will recognize civilians coming to meet with you. That's a normal occurrence. Should we have them come here?" Viktor asked.

"If we do, it needs to be while Armando is gone, I want him left out of all plans for the time being, until we have a chance to find out more on him," I said.

"Is he still leaving tomorrow?" Sephie asked.

"He left today. Keith let me know he had changed plans. He's moved all his meetings tomorrow to his house," Stephen said.

"Hmm. That's weird," she said.

"Did Ms. Jackson have any insight about Giana?" Viktor asked.

"Not much, but she did say she was just as ambushed as we were that day when Giana pretended to apologize to me. She's also been suspecting that Giana's been on something for a while now and she feels like Armando has to know. She said they've had dinner with her and Mr. Turner a few times and it was really obvious she was blitzed out of her mind," she said.

"She also said Glana told her that they were planning on going to Italy at the end of the month," Misha said. "So, either Armando is planning on leaving, or that's when Giana is planning on robbing him. Or both, I don't know yet."

"He's really not doing himself any favors by leaving early and he'll essentially be cutting himself off from any favor if he thinks going back to Italy right now is a good move," I said.

Sephie had come to a stopping point and wiped her hands. She turned to face me, smiling at me. "Have you talked to them. about what you told me last night yet?" she asked me quietly enough that only I could hear her. When she turned to look at me, I felt her warmth spread over my body. I leaned down, kissing her quickly. I stood up, still looking at her gorgeous smile. "I think you should," she urged. She held her arm up in between us, showing me the goosebumps that were clearly visible. I kissed. her once more, overcome with just how much I loved her.

I looked to the guys. "I've been thinking I should do away with all the bosses, Armando included, and run the city myself. With Sephie and you 5, I think it's possible," I said. They were silent for a few moments as they thought about what I'd just said. I was most curious about how Misha would react, honestly. As was Sephie. She turned to look at him so she could see his reaction. He had his faraway look in his eye, but then we all saw his upper body shudder as he shook off the reaction.

Sephie laughed at him. "Same, Misha. Same," she said.

Ivan's sly smile spread across his face. "Trino called this one, you know." The other guys looked to him, curious as to what he was talking about. Sephie must've told him what Trino said when we were at his island house, because I don't remember mentioning it to anyone. I felt Sephie laugh quietly. Ivan said, "This was suggested when we were at Trino's island house. Trino said the city already had their rightful King and Queen and didn't need anything else. I happen to agree with him."

Chapter Two Hundred Fifty-Nine

Adrik

We set a meeting with the people organizing in the different areas of the city that we knew about so far. Since Armando was at his house, I had everyone come to the building to make it easier. I regularly met with groups of people from all areas of the city, so it wouldn't raise suspicion. It wasn't the same as having known drug dealers walk into the building to meet with me. After the meeting, we had planned to go to the house. I knew the guys were just as stressed as I was. Being away from everything, if only for the weekend, helped everyone relax to make it through the week.

The meeting went well and Sephie was happy with the people that showed up as well. "It's obvious the people love you. It's always been obvious to me. You're so popular that I still can't believe I'd never heard of you before the night I first met you at the restaurant. Not once did any of the other bosses mention you when they were meeting at the restaurant," she said. We were in the backseat, on the way to the house.

"I do try to stay as anonymous as possible. The other bosses wouldn't necessarily need to mention me unless there was a problem. That's why I showed up that night," I said.

"Was it just Anthony's side hustle or was there something more?" she asked me, as curious as always.

"That and I was already hearing rumors of increased taxes in a few areas of town. Not as bad as it is now, even. Anthony made sure that conversation didn't happen, so the bosses took advantage and raised taxes on everyone quickly."

"At least the people are smart enough to know it wasn't you. Now they know they can count on you to help solve the issue, too." She leaned her head on my shoulder. "You're a good King," she said wistfully.

Our conversation on the way to the house made me start to wonder if Anthony had been put up to doing what he did that night at the restaurant specifically so I wouldn't call the other bosses out about raising taxes. They couldn't have known I would come to Sephie's defense. I'd never shown any favor to any woman in public, well, ever. At this point, I was starting to question everything and everyone around me.

Later that night, I brought it up to Sephie again. "How well did the other bosses know you, solnishko?"

"I think you'd have to ask them that question, but Armando is the only one I ever really spoke to. Even with him, it was rare. He asked me questions a few times about whether I had a boyfriend and things like that, but he made it seem like he was trying to set me up with one of his sons. He would always say 'my son is about your age' and then he'd tell me what his son did or was going to do about whatever we were talking about. I just let him talk, same as I do now," she said. She thought for a minute, then added, "I got free help out of him when it would happen, so I never really minded. But I kept the details about my life to myself. I didn't like the idea of him having more information about me than I wanted him to, regardless of whether he was nice to me or not."

"Maybe he was trying to gauge your interest in him, not his son," I said. I hadn't given it much thought, but Armando was very affectionate toward Sephie, even from the very beginning.

Sephie looked at me and scrunched up her face. "Eww."

I couldn't help but laugh. I never had to question her love for me. I would be more worried about her leaving me for one of the guys than I ever would about her leaving me for someone else. And I never worried about her leaving me for one of the guys.

"I mean, Armando is a nice-looking man. He takes care of himself much more than the other bosses. Those dudes have been letting their money attract women for years now. Armando still has some self-respect and tries to keep in shape. He looks good for his age, although now that I think about it, I really have no clue how old he is," she said.

"He's roughly ten years older than I am," I said.

"That's young to be a boss. I know how you became the world's youngest boss, but how did he manage it? And how long has he been a boss?" she asked as she climbed into bed, waiting for me to turn the overhead light off.

"Armando was the underboss of the man he took over from. That man only had one daughter and she was never interested in anything related to business. He handed everything over to Armando when he became too ill to run things." I stretched out on the bed, waiting for Sephie to lay across my chest.

"And has he done a better or worse job than that guy?" she asked, settling in. She rested her chin on my chest, so she could look at me.

"Mostly better. He's made a few deals that have gone bad, as you know. Overall, he's tried to win the favor of the people in his area. He's quite generous, has a good relationship with the important people, and looks out for the people in his area."

"Did he become boss before or after you did?" she asked. I could see her mind trying to make a connection, but I wasn't exactly sure where she was going with this line of thinking.

"Before. Until I took over, he was the youngest boss the city had ever seen," I said. She chewed on her bottom lip, lost in thought. I stayed quiet, curious where her mind was going. I also loved watching her when she was deep in thought. It was almost as adorable as when she was confused about something.

"What if he's been playing both sides this whole time?" she asked. She thought for a moment longer. "He always had a good relationship with the other bosses, from what I could tell at the meetings. He was always the one that would get everyone to come to an agreement when they'd argue over something. He would work the problem out. Eventually, the other bosses started to look at him for direction. Like they would defer to him, almost." She sat up, crossing her legs, so she could fidget with her hands. I sat up farther as well, so I could see her better. "Let's just pretend for a minute that he got it in his head that he was going to run the city, because the other bosses had been giving him more respect. Add in that he might've been trying to feel me out," she shuddered at that thought. "Still gross, for the record," she said, smiling at me. "You were gone for a few months prior to the night I met you. Maybe Mando started thinking he could run the city himself, without you. Then you come back and in one night, take the city back and take me from him. Remember that first night at his house in Italy? How weirdly thoughtful he was about trying to set me up with his son and how that didn't work out because I was meant for bigger and better things? And then again when we were at the restaurant after the meeting with the scummy lawyer?" she asked.

I nodded my head. "I let those go because I thought he was just being a creepy old dude. You guys made me all squishy inside talking about me anyway, but Mando's comments made me tense. It was just covered up by what you guys said about me. Mando doesn't know me well enough to say things like that about me. He still doesn't. He might think he does. He might wish he does, but he doesn't. I would take a comment like that from Trino better than I would Armando. At least Trino is honest about his intentions." Her fingers were nervously picking at the waistband of my pajama pants. She had taken the drawstring. rolled it up, unrolled it, twisted it around her fingers, and now she'd moved on to the waistband as she talked.

I thought about what she'd just said. "I knew Armando had a good relationship with the other bosses, but I didn't realize they had put him in any kind of leadership position, if you will," I said. "I did miss out on some very important details while we were gone trying to get Viktor back." I ran my hand through my hair. That period of my life was one of the roughest times I've been through. Trying to get Viktor out, without getting the rest of us caught was quite possibly the hardest thing we've ever done. I was more nervous walking into that meeting at the restaurant that night than I'd ever been. I'd been away for months. A lot can happen in that amount of time. Everything faded away when I walked in and saw Sephie staring at me.

1 felt her fingers lightly running over my cheek and through my short facial hair. "Penny for your thoughts," she said quietly.

I looked at her, smiling at me. Her hands had quieted and she was waiting for me to think through what was going through my mind, just as I had waited for her. It was one of the many things I loved about her. "I was thinking about being gone, trying to get Viktor out. It was a rough time. I rarely get worried about business, but I was nervous walking into that meeting that night at the restaurant. I'd been gone longer than I had wanted to be. I didn't know what to expect. Then I walk in and find you staring at me," I said, smiling at her. "Everything else seemed inconsequential from that point on."

The smile that spread across her face made my heart threaten to stop.

Chapter Two Hundred Sixty

Adrik

Misha and Sephie left for a run the next morning while the rest of us went to the gym. Where Misha had dreaded having to run with Sephie in the beginning, he now looked forward to it. After the attack on them, they rarely went for a run in the city anymore. They would use the treadmills in the gym, but they both said they hated it. When we were at the house, though, they would be gone for sometimes two hours. Sephie had told me that Misha was now wanting to take the long route each time they went for a run. It made her happy to not feel like she was killing him any longer.

I discussed what Sephie and I had talked about the night before with the other four guys while we were in the gym. "It should surprise no one that Sephie made a great observation last night." The guys all stopped and turned toward me to hear what she'd come up with this time. I laughed at their curious, but not surprised in the least expressions. "We were talking about Armando and how well he and the other bosses knew Sephic before she met me. She said Armando was the only one that would ever talk to her like a person, but she always got the feeling he was trying to set her up with one of his sons, because he would mention he had a son her age frequently."

"Yeah, I don't think it was for his son. I think it was for him," Ivan said.

"Sephie ended up saying the same thing last night, but I'm curious to hear how you came to that conclusion," I said. Ivan never ceased to amaze me with his observation skills. They were almost as good as Sephie's.

"I caught him looking at her a few times, but I don't think I would've noticed had he not made a few comments about her when we were at his house in Italy. He doesn't really know her, so they seemed very out of context. They came across as mostly harmless at the time and they would've been, had he known her better, but she told me that none of the bosses knew much, if anything about her. Including Armando. It just felt wrong, so I started paying attention. It's calmed down somewhat since he and Giana got together, but much like her inability to not stare at Misha, he's incapable of not staring at Sephie when he thinks no one is watching."

I thought about his words for a minute. What Sephie had said last night was starting to make more sense. "That makes the rest of what she said last night seem more plausible," I said.

"What else has she known all along that none of us caught on to until she pointed it out?" Andrei asked.

I chuckled. "I wouldn't say she's known all along. She's just seeing Armando in a bit of a different light with everything going on and remembering things in the past that seemed benign at the time that didn't age well. She told me that the other bosses were starting to put Armando into a bit of a leadership role among them before I came back. She said Armando would help settle disputes and would get them all to agree, She's also said all along that she never even knew of my existence until that night at the restaurant. She said she never heard the other bosses mention my name. Not once."

"That's why she calls you the Lord King Boss," Viktor said, laughing. "She didn't know who you were or what to call you when she found out you were coming to the meeting."

"It's authoritative," I said, causing more laughter from everyone. I think they enjoyed the lighter side that Sephie had brought out in all of us, but especially me. I hardly ever joked about anything before Sephie, but now we could find the lighter side of just about anything. It was a welcome change.

*So, you think Armando is playing both sides to see which side will win? That way, If you lose, he can still keep favor with the other bosses?" Ivan asked.

"It's entirely possible. Given that he didn't come clean about his argument with his associate after the meeting on Monday, I'm rethinking his loyalties. You all know how well I take betrayal of any kind," I said. "Sephie said last night, just to play Devil's advocate, that Mando might've gotten it in his head that he could run the city while I was gone. If you add in that he might have been feeling Sephie out for himself instead of the story about his son like he said and her point was that I basically came back and in one night took it all away from him. He might be playing both sides out of spite."

"Sephie didn't give him any hope that he had a chance with her before she met you, did she?" Stephen asked. I could tell he was perplexed over Armando's behavior, if this really was true.

"No. She said that thought was gross. Given the convulsions she has thinking about it, I believe her. She said he used to stay 1 after occasionally and would help her clean up after the other bosses had left. He would ask her questions about her life, like he was trying to find more information out about her. She said she never told him anything important and that she didn't like the idea of him knowing things about her. We know how private she can be. I doubt he got anything useful out of her," I said,

"In all my 900 years, I'll never understand people getting upset about losing things that don't even belong to them in the first place," Stephen said.

"You and me hoth. It's still just a working theory about Armando, but it seems to be making more sense, the more I think about it. We should hopefully be able to get some answers if Keith and Chris can record his meetings. He's never taken his security seriously. I'm hoping that remains the case and they're able to record him easily," I said. "But, for now, I want Armando left out of everything."

"We might be able to test his allegiance, Give him false information and see what he does with it," Ivan said.

"I agree. We just need to be careful and time that right. We don't want to scare him into hiding too soon if he finds out we're on to him," Viktor said.

"Agreed. We definitely need to time everything just right. I'm not doing anything without Misha and Sephie," I said. 1 remembered something Ivan had said the night before, while Sephie was still cooking dinner and we were all standing in the kitchen together. "You know who originally suggested that I do away with the other bosses?" I asked, looking at Ivan. He shook his head no. "Armando."

"That kind of an idea comes up in conversation because you've already been thinking about it," Ivan said, his hand running over his goatee.

Viktor did some digging on who the man was that we overheard arguing with Armando late morning. He had to rely on Sephie for translation, as many of the articles were in Italian, but he managed to find a few that were in English since he spent part of the year in the city. She was curled up next to him on the couch, so he could search for information and she could translate what he'd found.

"It appears he and Armando are related, but distantly. They've been business partners since Armando was much younger, however. I've found quite a few business deals going back decades," Viktor said, "I can't find any indication that he's involved in the illegal side of Armando's business. At least not directly. It doesn't make sense that he would be urging him to switch sides if he's not involved."

"Do the other bosses make business deals with each other like you and Armando?" Sephie asked me. As soon as she said it, a lightbulb went off in Viktor's head and he started down an entirely new rabbit hole, digging for more information.

"Minor stuff, mostly. The other bosses tend to rely heavily on the illegal side of things. They have a few legitimate businesses set up, mostly mattress stores, but they're mostly a front and a way to launder money. They don't make very much money off of those businesses. Their wealth comes from the illegal side almost exclusively. Armando is the only boss other than me that invests in legitimate ventures," I said.

"Maybe that's why they're getting greedy. I would think there's a finite number of addicts in the city. That's a fixed income supply." She was still reading an article that Viktor had given her to translate while she talked out loud. "Plus, a significant portion of your customer base dies every year. If you're an idiot like Sal and push brawn on your customer base, then you're going to lose more customers than you gain." She looked up at me, a smirk on her face. "I don't even know anything about business and I know that's a terrible model for trying to stay wealthy."

"You do make a good point though, love," I said. "It would explain why they're getting greedy. The commissioner instituted a drug prevention program for at-risk youth last year. He talked to me before he started it. Most of the addicts in the city are adults, so taking the younger people out of the supply chain, if you will, shouldn't have made a significant difference. Maybe it was more successful than the other bosses expected. I would expect nothing less than for them to not see that coming."

"Commissioner 1, Bosses 0," Sephie said, going back to translating for Viktor.

Chapter Two Hundred Sixty-One

Sephie

“Are we taking the long route again, my adorable Russian guardian?” I asked Misha as we got ready for our morning run.

“I’m down if you’re down. It’s colder this morning than I thought it was going to be, so I don’t know how long you want to stay outside. I don’t want to be the reason you stay cold the rest of the day,” he said.

“As it happens, running warms me up,” I said, grinning at him. “But I love you for thinking about that. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I ha te being cold.”

“I might’ve noticed. I’m very observant,” he said, sarcastically.

As we set off on our run, my mind was still replaying the conversation with Adrik from the night before. I couldn’t shake the feeling that I’d missed something about Armando and now we were in trouble. Even though I felt like I’d missed something, I still couldn’t see what it was I’d missed. I was still having trouble believing that Armando could be playing both sides. He’d seemed so upfront and honest about everything from the beginning.

The great thing about running with Misha is that he enjoyed the silence. I’d tried running with Max a few times and he always tried to talk to me while we ran. I hated it. I liked to be left alone to my thoughts. It was a great way to work through problems in my head. Or not. Sometimes I didn’t think about anything and just enjoyed the break. Either way, Misha was there, silently ensuring I was safe.

It took us almost two hours to go the long route. Misha used to struggle to make it all the way, but he looked like he could keep going this morning. Once we slowed to a walk, we usually talked about anything and everything on our way back to the house. I enjoyed my alone time with each of them and I think they enjoyed it with me as well.

“I needed that,” he said.

“I did too. I think we’ve all been extra stressed lately. Have you been having trouble sleeping?” I asked. It was a random thought that just popped into my head, which I had learned was usually an indication that the other person was thinking it, but didn’t necessarily want to say it.

He laughed. “Yeah. I haven’t said anything to anybody yet, but it’s been happening for a bit. Since Giana accused you, I think.”

“You’re still mad at her, aren’t you?” I asked. While it was adorable and heartwarming that he had gotten so angry at her accusation, I was starting to get concerned at his inability to let it go.

“Yeah. I don’t think I’ve ever been so angry at a chick for something she didn’t even do to me,” he said.

I stopped walking. We were both still catching our breath. “Misha, you have to let it go. Not for her, but for you. It’s one of the hardest things to do, but trusting that she’ll get her own Karma will make you feel much better.” He looked at me, then looked at the ground, like he knew I was right, but he still didn’t want to let go. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed this one, my adorable Russian guardian, but Karma tends to come down harshly on those that want to harm me,” I added, quietly. “You just have to be patient.” He raised his gaze, a sly smile stretching across his face. He put his arm around my shoulders as we continued our walk back to the house.

“I should listen to my own advice. I’m having the same problem, just with Armando,” I said.

“I can’t figure out what the deal is with him either,” Misha said. “I want to like him, but he said a few things when we first got to his house In Italy that I didn’t like.”

“Like what?” I asked. He’d never talked about this, so I was clueless as to what he was referring to.

“That first night, when it took you and Boss a little longer to come to dinner. We all knew it was because you could barely walk and told him as much. He made a rude comment about your se x life with Boss being the reason you couldn’t walk.”

I stopped walking again. “What did he say exactly? Do you remember?”

“Not exactly. It was something like if you were his girlfriend, you wouldn’t be able to walk much anytime. He said it quietly and I think only me and Ivan heard it. The other guys were standing far enough away that they missed it.”

“Shi t. Sometimes I ha te being right,” I said. Misha looked at me, confused, but also a little concerned. “Have you heard him say anything else that was weird like that?”

“That was the worst one, but then there was that really awkward toast he made to you. I didn’t think he knew you well enough to talk about you like that,” Misha said.

I smiled at him. “I just said the same thing to Adrik last night. That didn’t sit well with me, but it was covered up by the things that you guys said about me. Armando doesn’t know me well enough. He might wish he did, but he doesn’t.” When I had stopped walking, Misha removed his aim from my shoulders so he could look down at me while we talked. I grabbed his wrist and put his arm back around my shoulders to continue walking once again to the house. “Armando used to stay after the other hosses had left and he would help me clean up. I always thought he was trying to set me up with his son. He would ask me questions about my personal life, trying to find out if I was single, blah blah blah. I never told him anything of importance and I never really thought anything of it. I was just happy to have some help. When Adrik and I were talking about this last night, he pointed it out that he wasn’t asking for his son. He was asking for him,” I said. I looked up to see Misha’s reaction. His face scrunched up much like mine had the night before, I couldn’t help but laugh. “I had the same reaction. But if you take that into consideration and you also take into account that the other bosses had put Armando into somewhat of a leadership role while you guys were gone trying to get Viktor hack, it gives Armando a motive to be playing both sides right now. Adrik came back and basically in one night took back the city and took me away from Armando. Not that there was EVER a chance of that happening. For the record. I felt like that needed to be said out loud. Because gross.”

Misha laughed. “I don’t think anyone is worried about you leaving Boss anytime soon, gazelle. It’s obvious to anyone who sees. you two with each other that you belong together.”

As we walked up the steps toward the back door, Ivan was walking by toward the kitchen. He stopped and opened the door for us. “Once you guys get cleaned up, Boss wants everyone in his office,” he said.

“This sounds serious,” I said.

“We had a conversation about Armando while we were in the gym,” Ivan said.

“We had a conversation about Armando while we were walking back to the house,” Misha said.

“Which reminds me, why didn’t you tell me about the gross comment he made about me when we first got to Italy?” I asked Ivan as I smacked his shoulder.

He laughed, but tried to look apologetic. “I didn’t tell Boss what he said yet. I don’t know if I should tell Boss what he said. He might want to ki ll him immediately.” Ivan pulled me toward him, hugging me to him. “And I didn’t tell you, princess, because you were already handling all you could handle at the time. You didn’t need to worry about pervy old men on top of everything else.”

I sighed, resting my head against his sizeable chest. “I ha te that I can’t argue with you sometimes.” I felt his chest vibrate as he laughed at me. “Go get cleaned up, princess. Boss is going to need you to keep him from getting all murdery once he finds out what was said,” Ivan said pushing me toward the back stairs.

Chapter Two Hundred Sixty-Two

Sephie

I walked through the bedroom into Adrik’s office to find him at his desk. He was engrossed in the papers in front of him, so he didn’t notice me. I stopped at the doorway. We’d been able to feel each other enough lately that I wanted to experiment with it, just to see what would happen.

He had a hatred of shirts when we were at the house that I happened to love. I stood in the doorway, watching him contemplate whatever he was thinking about, my own thoughts turning to just how much I loved him. I felt the warmth start to spread through my body that was present anytime I thought about him and I pushed it to him, seeing if he would notice,

He inhaled sharply, then immediately looked up to find me. He noticed. I was still leaning against the doorway, a small smile on my lips while I experimented. As soon as he looked at me, the warmth grew to an intense desire for him, which I also pushed toward him. His sexy smirk told me he could feel it, loud and clear.

He stood up, closing the distance between us quickly. “Why do you pick right now to do this to me?” he asked. One arm went around my waist, as he pulled me with him. He closed his office door behind him as he walked us quickly to the bathroom. I couldn’t help but giggle. “I don’t like time constraints with you,” he said, his voice husky. “But I do like any chance I have to see you naked.”

“We’ve already established that I’m terrible at denying you,” I said as I pulled my shirt over my head.

He cursed under his breath as I continued to shed my clothes. He walked to the shower, turning it on for me. “How was your run, love?” he asked as he jumped onto the bathroom counter to watch me.

“Good. We both needed it, I think,” I said, stepping into the shower.

“Yeah? How so?”

“Misha’s still mad at Giana and I’m mad at Armando. We needed the stress relief,” I said.

“It surprises me how angry Misha got with Giana. He’s normally such a happy guy, but he’s clearly still angry with her. He’s very protective of you, solnishko,” a sly smile creeping across his face. “Are you still angry with Armando because of what we talked about last night or is there something more?”

I sighed, but didn’t answer right away. Instead, I put my face under the water. When I finally turned to look at him, he said, “there’s more, isn’t there? Did Misha tell you about his inappropriate comments in Italy?” I nodded my head. “How bad was it?” he asked. I could tell he was trying not to get too upset.

“It doesn’t make me like him any more at the moment. I’m sure there have been worse things said Hit me before, but it does make the theory that he was thinking he had a chance with me seem more plausible,” I said. I turned the water off and was met by Adrik who had a towel for me once I stepped out of the shower. He wrapped the towel around me, saying, “new technique to keep my anger in check. All bad news must be delivered while you’re naked from now on.”

“That’s going to make it awkward in a meeting, but okay. If you insist,” I laughed.

The guys were waiting in his office when we walked in. Ivan looked at me curiously, wondering if I’d told him exactly what Armando said. I shook my head no. “Coward,” he said, laughing at me. I readily agreed with him.

Adrik had a hold of my hand and pulled me toward one of the couches. He sat down and then pulled me into his lap, so I could leon back against him. It seemed to be one of his favorite ways to have me near him. I wasn’t going to argue as he kept me WASTIL.

“I think it’s time we stop all this nonsense for good. We have good intel on the brawn operations, so we know how to hit them. I want to do away with all the bosses, as well. Armando included. I haven’t decided how exactly I’m going to run the entire city by myself, but I’ll figure that out later. But I’m done dealing with these children,” Adrik said. As he said it out loud, I felt the goosebumps rise over my entire body once again. I glanced at Misha quickly, curious how he would react as well. I saw his upper body shudder slightly. I squeezed Adrik’s arms around me, knowing this was what needed to happen.

“I love a good planning session in the morning,” Ivan said.

We spent the next few hours planning and talking about every possible scenario we could think of. We talked through Armando still being loyal, Armando not being loyal, and everything in between. I spent most of the rest of the morning and into the afternoon listening to the guys talk about how they were going to hit the brawn operations. I was curious how everything was going to work, but I was also worried where I fit into those plans. I’d gotten so used to never being alone. At least one of the guys was always with me. Now, I was faced with the very real possibility of having to be alone while they took care of the brawn operations. My mind was so focused on that and the sudden fear of being alone that I didn’t notice my legs start to shake until Adrik pulled me closer to him. “Solnishko, what’s wrong? I can feel your fear, my love. What’s going on?” he whispered in my ear. I was so lost in my thoughts that it jarred me back to reality. I heard him laugh quietly as I glanced around the room. The guys were talking amongst themselves and not paying attention to us. “Talk to me,” Adrik said as he leaned down and kissed my neck gently.

I shifted in his lap so I could more easily see him. As soon as I looked at him, I saw the concern grow on his face. He searched my eyes for a moment, then a small smile spread across his face. “You won’t be alone, love. I haven’t figured out the details yet, but I know for sure you won’t be alone,” he said as he kissed me gently.

“You’re getting better at that,” I said quietly. My fingers moved to the collar of his shirt, then to his neck. He closed his eyes briefly, enjoying my touch. When he opened them again, his deep blue eyes were sincere. “This one was easy. I have the same fear. In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m afraid to leave you alone,” he said. I felt the pull in my chest that he feels as I smiled at him. I rested my forehead against his as the relief washed over my body.

“Sestrichka, can you translate this for me?” Viktor asked, handing me his computer. The conversation had shifted from planning to gathering more information on Armando and his associate that I’d overheard him arguing with. Viktor was trying to find as much information on his associate as possible, but that meant much of the information was in Italian.

“Of course, Papa Bear,” I said as I moved next to him on the couch. I scanned over yet another article, trying to find the valid information in it. We’d spent much of the afternoon looking for information on Armando. Viktor was now also looking to see if he’d made deals with any of the other bosses. “This one is about a housing project outside Naples. Um, looks like possible vacation rentals, as well as residential. Mando seems to keep the same investors around him. Giana’s father is on this one.” I kept reading and came across a new name. “Oh, well, that’s interesting,” I said. I looked up from the computer to find everyone waiting for me to finish. “It seems Salvadori is branching out into Italian real estate.”

There was a collective groan, along with quiet cursing as they all tried to contain their anger at finding out Armando had made at least one deal with Salvadori.

“If they’ve made one deal, there’s a good chance there’s more,” Viktor said. I handed his computer back to him.

“If anyone can find more deals, it’s you, Papa Bear.”

Stephen’s phone beeped, then beeped again, then beeped again. He looked at the incoming messages. “It’s Keith. He’s sent over what he was able to get today at Armando’s house,” he said. He got up to hand me his phone, along with a pair of earphones. *Here, these might help you hear the conversation better,” he said. “You know, since your human hearing is Inferior to mine.”

“This is why you’re my favorite senior citizen,” I said as I moved to the table so I could write more easily.,

I went through all the recordings, listening to each one multiple times to make sure I was hearing everything correctly. I listed all the projects that Armando spoke about on the recordings and gave the highlights about what was said to Adrik. He knew about all the projects. None of the conversation that was recorded raised any red flags. There were two meetings that Keith wasn’t able to record, because Armando shut the door, but Chris was able to get a picture of the men he met with. One of them was the man we now knew as Ricardo, the man that I’d overheard Armando arguing with.

“Viktor, what if Ricardo is the missing link?” I asked. Viktor looked at me, somewhat puzzled. “What if he’s the go-between. Can you find any deals he’s made with the other bosses? Like what if he’s the silent partner in all this? It might not look like he has a hand in the illegal side of things, but he invests so much in the legitimate side that he has a say in the illegal side.” Viktor just raised his eyebrow as he thought about the question, then returned to his computer and started yet another search.

Chapter Two Hundred Sixty-Three

Sephie

Adrik had stood up from his desk and pulled me up from my chair to go outside for a bit before the sun went down. We both needed a break, but I had the idea about Ricardo and wanted to ask before I forgot. “Come, we’ll resume this later,” Adrik said as he pulled me from his office. We stopped at the closet so I could grab a jacket, then continued downstairs. He held my hand in his, his fingers laced through mine.

As soon as we were outside and mostly alone, I felt the stress melt away. I took a deep breath, inhaling the fresh air. “I needed this break,” I said.

“Me too. You’re the best excuse for getting me out of the office,” he said. “Especially now that I can feel what you’re feeling more. I know when you’re getting stressed. I can ignore my own stress, but I’m incapable of ignoring yours. I want to make it stop as soon as I feel it.”

I moved closer to him, my other arm holding on to his arm as we walked hand-in-hand. “I do love that you’re so protective of me. It might seem over the top to someone else, but I completely lost the feeling of safety when I lived with my uncle. Even after I got away from him, I never really got it back. That feeling of constantly being on edge, constantly looking over my shoulder, or waiting for the next attack to happen never went away until I met you.” He let go of my hand so he could put his arm around me. He stopped, pulling me closer to him. “It’s kind of silly when I think about it. I know I can survive things most people wouldn’t, because I’ve done it. I’m still here. But the hypervigilance gets exhausting after a while. You’ve brought peace back to my life and now I never want to be without it again,” I said.

He inhaled sharply. “Sephie, I never want you to worry. About anything. You’re a very big reason that I made the decision to get rid of the other bosses. I don’t want to have to constantly worry about one of them trying to hurt you to get to me. I want you and Misha to be able to run through the city again without worrying you’re going to be attacked. I want to be able to walk to Vinny’s to get you your favorite sandwich in the middle of the day without worrying someone is going to try and grab you. I want you to always know that you’re completely safe with me. And if I’m not with you, I want you to know you’re completely safe with whichever one of the guys is with you.”

“Or three,” I said, laughing.

“Or three. Safety in numbers, solnishko,” he said, laughing with me.

I wrapped my arms around his waist, resting my head on his chest. His arms held me tight against him, causing me to feel deliciously warm throughout my entire body. “I love you, Adrik,” I sighed.

“I love you, Sephie. More than anything.” he said, kissing the top of my head.

After we left the office, the guys moved everything downstairs. They were spread out on the couches when Adrik and I came back as the sun was setting. I had a feeling they did it so they could be closer to the kitchen. They’d all grown to love me cooking for them, especially now that I was trying to make more traditional Russian dishes, but it felt like they enjoyed helping just as much as they enjoyed eating. I never had to wash a dish when they were around and they were always willing to jump in and help. It gave us a chance to talk about things, just the seven of us. It was a strange dynamic, our weird little family, but it was one that I adored.

“I have more for you to translate, sestrichka,” Viktor said as we walked in. “Your idea that Ricardo is the missing link between the other bosses and Armando seems to be a good one, but I need you to translate to know for sure.”

I scanned the articles that he’d found while Adrik and I were gone as I walked to the kitchen. They all got up and followed me, sitting around the large kitchen Island so they’d be ready to help and we could all still discuss the day’s topic of choice. “It looks like Armando has deals with Niko and Vito as well. The only names I’m not seeing are Darlo and Massimo, as far as the bosses go.” I clicked to the next article, scanning it briefly. “And there’s Lorenzo,” I said, looking up at Adrik. “So, Armando has deals of varying sizes with everyone. Except maybe Dario and Massimo, but that could be because we just haven’t found them yet.” Adrik did not look happy.

“So, it looks like the theory that he’s playing both sides is a solid one,” Ivan said. “Now the question is how much has he told the other bosses about our plans.”

“This makes me worry about Trino, too. He has all of them down there against just him and Martin,” I said.

“I need to have another conversation with Trino,” Adrik said as he walked to me. He put his hands on my hips as he stood behind me. “But after dinner. I’m starving,” he said as he leaned down to kiss my cheek.

“Say no more. I can fix that,” I said as I pulled his arms around me tighter.

“This might be one of many reasons why I love you so much,” he said, kissing my neck.

As the guys were cleaning up after dinner, Adrik called Trino. He put him on speaker so we could all hear the conversation. I had hopped on the counter, so he was standing in between my legs, but with his back toward me, so everyone could hear.

“Jefe, que pasa?” Trino picked up on the first ring. “I’m beginning to get used to these frequent calls. It makes me feel loved, if I’m being honest.”

Adrik chuckled. “You might change your mind after you hear what I’m about to tell you.”

“Are you going to tell me that Armando has turned against you and now he’s coming down here to meet with me also?” he asked. His tone was jovial, like that was the most outlandish scenario he could think of.

“Well, you’re half right,” Adrik said. There was silence on the other end of the phone for a moment.

“For real, Jefe? He’s turned against you?” While Trino had been joking, he was now very serious. His voice had an edge of anger to it.

“We don’t know for sure yet, but the more we uncover, the more it looks like he’s been playing both sides. He’s made deals with three of the other bosses. Dario and Massimo are the only two he apparently hasn’t made deals with. But because he’s definitely made deals with Salvadori, Niko, Vito, and even Lorenzo, I’m not sure how much information he’s given to them about our plans. I want you to be careful, Trino,” Adrik said. “You’re free to do whatever you feel is necessary when it comes to the bosses that are still down there.”

Trino thought for a moment. “If Armando is giving Information to Anthony and Lorenzo, that would make them the world’s best actors. I didn’t think they had that in them. I could be wrong, but they’ve always come across as, well, idiots.”

“Well, you’re right about Anthony, at least,” I said. “He’s definitely an idiot, but he does have a certain level of cunning to him. I think it’s from Lorenzo more than anyone. He’s the only one I’ve never seen in person. He’s the one that was mentoring Anthony on his side gig into human trafficking. If there’s an evil mastermind among those two, it has to be him. Anthony can barely spell his name on a good day.”

“Miha, have I mentioned how much I love your Inability to mince words?” Trino said, laughing.

“My father banished Lorenzo years ago. There’s a reason he banished him instead of handing down another punishment. I think Sephie is right. He’s the brains behind Sal and Anthony’s plans. I just don’t know where Armando fits into their plans and I don’t know how much Information he’s given them about what we’re planning. I know you take your security seriously, but extra careful with all of them down there. You can send them back at any point, too. We’ll take care of all of them Adrik

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King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 264

Chapter Two Hundred Sixty-Four

Sephie

“lefe, I’m still having too much fun fu cking with them. I did get Anthony to admit they were trying to make a deal with the Mexicans. Lorenzo wasn’t with him, so that theory tracks. You know how well I take betrayal. I’m looking forward to sending a message to anyone in the future that even considers betraying me like this. I’m still letting Massimo believe that I’m going to let him live. I’m really working up to crushing his soul completely right before I light him on fire.” Trino was silent for a moment. We all tried not to laugh too loudly. We were still more amused than we should’ve been at Trino’s choice of how to end Massimo. “Dario, though,” he said. He sighed. “I actually feel bad for that guy. It’s clear that he’s been me ntally broken by Massimo all these years. He’s losing his grip on reality some days. Other days, he’s still with it. Those days, he asks if he can get out. He says he’ll disappear and no one will ever see him again. He just wants to be left alone and to never see Massimo again.”

“You can send him back here. Not that I doubt your assessment of him, Trino, but I trust Sephie’s more. She gets the final say on whether he can disappear or not,” Adrik said.

Trino laughed. “I won’t argue with you on that one. Mostly, I won’t argue with her. On anything.”

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I couldn’t help but laugh. “When all this is over, I promise to come to Colombia to help you find a suitable girlfriend, Trino. You don’t have to sweet talk me.” I said as I wrapped my legs loosely around Adrik’s waist.

“Miha, you’re welcome here whenever you like,” Trino said. “I’ll send Dario back to you so you can see his me ntal state. It’s just like Sephie said it would be, Jefe. And I’ll be extra careful with Anthony and Lorenzo now. It’s possible their plans with the Mexicans are much worse than we originally thought. I have spies throughout Mexico, I’ll see what I can find out. In the meantime, I’ll get extra security.”

“Let me know what you find out. We’ll help with the Mexicans once we take care of the other bosses here,” Adrik said.

“We’ll see if it comes to that,” Trino said. “Keep me informed on Armando, too. I’ve never had any problems with that guy, but, he’s always been too nice for me. I don’t trust anyone who’s too nice.”

“I think you just implied that I’m a bi tch, Trino,” I said, trying to hold in my laughter. He was silent, as I’m sure he was trying to figure out a way to answer without offending me further. “That’s fair. Totally fair,” I said, laughing finally.

I heard the sigh of relief on the other end of the line. “Miha…” he said, laughing.

They ended the call after a few more minutes of discussion. Trino was going to send Dario back to the city within a few days. Massimo was never leaving Colombia again. Anthony and Lorenzo were free to leave, should they attempt it, but Trino had plans for taking care of both of them as well.

Adrik inhaled deeply once the call was over. He turned to face me, his hands running up my thighs. He was stressed over this entire situation and legitimately worried about Trino’s safety. He caught me smiling at him. “What?” he asked, his smirk slowly appearing on his face.

“You’re worried for Trino’s safety. That’s not very Lord King Boss of you, but I happen to like it. Don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone,” I said.

He laughed quietly. “Trina has always been honest with me. He’s a good guy. He had a rough rise to power, but things have bees great since he took over. I don’t want to see him lose that.” He sighed. “And it seems like he might be the only one 1 can trust now.” I just wrapped my arms around him, not really knowing the right thing to say. At least I could give him some comfort in the moment.

I hadn’t mentioned

anyone yet, but I was starting to feel a sense of impending doom. I just didn’t know exactly what it

was about yet. But I knew the storm was almost upon us.

The weekend was over all too soon and we had to move back to the penthouse to face reality for another week. I was starting to enjoy our weekend getaways where no one really knew where we were and we could just relax, enjoying being together. Adrik. and I always managed more alone time at the house than the penthouse, which I was never going to complain about. I knew he was busy, but I was grateful for any chance I got to have him all to myself.

Viktor, Stephen, and Ivan had left for the private airport, leaving Andrei and Misha with Adrik and I. Dario was set to arrive. from Colombia shortly this evening. Adrik wanted him brought to the penthouse right away, so no one would know he was back in the city without Massimo. He knew Salvadori had been trying to get Darin away from Massimo as well.

We were waiting in Adrik’s office for them to bring Dario to the building. Of course, we were talking about everything we’d learned over the weekend while we waited.

“We have to remember to add the end of the month to the whiteboard tomorrow. I think Giana is going to rob him and disappear at the end of the month,” Misha said. We’d talked about his anger toward Giana a few more times after we finished a run in the mornings at the house. He was starting to feel less angry toward her, but there was still no love for her with him.

“I think that’s a safe bet, my adorable Russian guardian. The bigger question is whether Armando will disappear with her or not,” I said.

“And what he’s going to do to her when he finds out she’s stolen from him,” Andrei said.

I looked to Adrik, curious. “What was Armando like with his ex-wives?” I asked.

Adrik thought for a minute. “I’m not really sure. Once he ended the relationship, I never really heard much about any of them. He moves on quickly to the next woman and his focus is on her.” I suddenly felt a sense of dread when he said those words. Something didn’t feel right, but I couldn’t figure out what. Adrik and Misha both noticed. Misha also felt something was wrong, but wasn’t sure what yet, either. Adrik had been at his desk while I was on one of the couches. He moved to the couch with me as soon as he felt my mood change. “What is it, love? What’s wrong? I can feel something is wrong,” he said as he sat down

next to me.

“I’m not sure. I just got this weird feeling of dread when we were talking about Armando,” I said. I chewed on my bottom lip. trying to figure out what it was that made me feel this way.

“I did too,” Misha said. “But I don’t know why.”

We didn’t have time to analyze what had happened, as the doors to the elevator opened. Viktor was back with Dario. Adrik looked at me, concerned. I smiled at him, my palm resting on his cheek. “It’s okay. It can wait until later,” I said. He leaned in and quickly kissed me before standing to meet Dario as they walked into his office.

Chapter Two Hundred Sixty-Five

Sephie

Viktor walked in first, with Dario behind him, and Ivan and Stephen behind Dario. “Any problems?” Adrik asked Viktor.

“None. Everything was quiet. Only your people at the airport. They put a different flight path on the paperwork, so no one will know that plane came from Colombia,” Viktor said. He walked past Adrik to sit down with Andrei, Misha, and I. I stood up quietly to hug him. They were only gone for a short time, but I was always relieved when they came back safe. The smile on Viktor’s face when I went to hug him told me that he felt the same relief. He hugged me tightly, kissing the top of my head, before sitting down.

Ivan and Stephen had walked around Dario, who was talking to Adrik. Each of them hugged me before finding a seat as well. Stephen whispered, “it’s bad,” in my ear as he hugged me. I looked at him, surprised, but said nothing. I took my usual spot behind Adrik’s desk so I could see Dario as he talked.

He looked like he’d aged at least ten years since the last time I saw him. His once salt and pepper hair was now much more salt than it was pepper. Dario had always been clean-shaven before. He was an older man, probably in his 60s, but I never thought he looked bad for his age. Now, however, he looked much older than 60, especially with his white facial hair growing in. He had a nervous look to him, like he was legitimately afraid for his life.

Dario had been a quiet man in the meetings. He rarely argued with the other bosses, but they rarely argued with him. I was never sure if it was because they were scared of him or Massimo. He exuded a quiet confidence in the meetings. The man sitting before us now was in no way confident. His eyes darted around the room like he was waiting for something to happen.

Adrik noticed the change in him and caught my eye as I walked past his desk. My eyes went wide as I walked past him, knowing no one else could see me. He gave me a knowing look as he looked back toward Dario. Adrik usually liked to make people nervous by staying quiet, but he chose to speak first this time, trying to put Dario’s nerves at ease. “Dario, Trino tells me you’d like to get out,” he said quietly,

Dario looked to Adrik, then glanced around the room again. His eyes never stayed on one thing for very long. He looked to me, then back to Adrik, then the door, the couches, each one of the guys, back to me. He nodded his head, his eyes still darting around the room. “I just want to be left alone. I won’t bother anyone. I can disappear. I’ve been planning it for years. No one will find me,” he said.

“You’ve been planning it for years?” Adrik asked. “How do you know no one else knows about it if you’ve been planning it that long?” Adrik’s tone of voice was similar to one he’d have with a young child.

“I haven’t told anybody where I’m going. They can try to look for me, but they won’t find me,” he said.

“But you’ve told people you’re going to disappear?” Adrik asked.

Dario nodded his head. “I told Sal. My kids don’t want any part of the business. They’ve been estranged from me for years. After they found out what Massimo did to my parents and that I stayed with him after I found out, they left. I haven’t spoken to them in years. I don’t even know where they are now,” he paused, like the weight of what he’d just said was hitting him. He started to speak, but stopped himself. Instead, he just sighed. “I was going to turn my part of the city over to Sal and disappear.

“Why didn’t you come to me or my father about what Massimo did to you?” Adrik asked.

Darlo’s eyes darted to Adrik. He looked scared. “Massimo would’ve found out. Sal told me that you wouldn’t do anything anyway. He was very adamant that I shouldn’t come to you. He told me you would punish me.” He looked to the floor quickly. He stared at the floor for a few moments.

“Apparently Massimo isn’t the only one that’s been fucking with his mind,” I said in Russian.

“Dario, I wouldn’t have punished you. You did nothing wrong. Massimo is the one that killed your parents. Why would you get punished for that?” Adrik said.

“Sal was very adamant,” Darlo said quietly.

“Did Sal threaten you against coming to me, Dario?”

Dario’s eyes darted up to Adrik. He didn’t need to answer. The look on his face told us everything we needed to know. I heard Adrik curse quietly under his breath. I knew exactly how he felt in that moment.

“Dario, do you know anything about what Sal has been planning in the city?” Ivan asked. While Ivan usually sounded like he was low-key threatening you with his words, his voice was soft when he spoke to Dario, He sounded like he did when he would talk to me, especially when I was upset.

Dario was quiet for a moment. He looked like he was having an internal struggle. His leg started bouncing up and down. He chewed on his nails. I knew he was anxious, but I honestly didn’t know how to give him any comfort right now. I stood up and moved closer to him. I thought maybe the fact that I was the only woman in the room, it might help him to feel at ease. I moved to the front of Adrik’s desk, in front of Dario, but still so Adrik could see him. “We can protect you, Dario. We can give you a safe place. No one knows you’re here. Not even Sal. We know that Massimo hurt you. He’s a very bad man. Sal, too. They’re both bad men. We want to protect you from them,” I said. I felt like I was talking to a child, but by the looks of him, he couldn’t handle much more.

His bouncing leg slowed. His gaze was fixed on a spot on the floor beside me, but I considered it progress that his eyes weren’t darting around the room. He slowly lifted his gaze to me, like he was seeing me for the first time since he came into the office. “I remember you. You were always at the restaurant. Sal and Armando were fighting over you when Ghost came back,” he said.

I tried to keep my own anger from rising to the surface at the thought of Sal and Armando thinking they had any kind of right or access to me. “The delusions of Sal and Armandu thinking they ever had any kind of chance with me aren’t important right now, Dario. Do you know anything about Sal’s plans? What he’s planning with Anthony and Lorenzo?” I asked. I glanced behind Dario at the guys. They were all tense at this new revelation.

Dario nodded his head. “Yeah, I know. Sal brags a lot. Almost as much as Massimo,” he said.

“Will you tell me what his plans are?” I asked, still trying to be as soft and quiet as I could. Dario looked at me once more. This time, he actually looked at me. He studied my face, my hair. For a few minutes, he just looked at me. I felt Adrik getting tense behind me. He was not a fan of other men looking at me, but I didn’t get the feeling that Dario was having any kind of Inappropriate thoughts. It felt like he was stuck in a memory as he looked at me. I discreetly motioned to Adrik to stay calm and to let it happen.

“You remind me of my daughter. She doesn’t have red hair, but she’s about your age. She’s beautiful like you though. At least she was the last time I saw her. You know, I’m glad she got away. I’m glad she’s not in this life. Sal was starting to look at her, too. You know he traffics girls, right? He blamed it on Anthony, but it was his idea. Lorenzo got him into it. Sal is a dirty old man. Anthony is just like him. Sal puts on a show In front of people, but he’s just as bad as Massimo. That’s how he knew about Massimo all these years. They recognize the evil in each other. Sal wants to take over the city. The only good thing about his plan is that he wants to get rid of Massimo. All the other bosses are helping him. You know that, right?” Dario asked. He was looking at me the whole time he was talking. I wanted to keep him talking as much as I could,

“Even Armando? He’s helping Sal?” I asked.

Chapter Two Hundred Sixty-Six

Sephie

“Yeah, they’ve been in business together for a few years now. Armando was trying to position himself as a leader for a while there too. I thought he and Sal were going to get into a war with each other, but then Ghost came back. It all kind of went to he ll that night at the restaurant with Anthony. Nobody expected Ghost to react that way over you. Half of us lost a substantial amount of money that night because we thought the rumors of him being gay were true. We knew he was coming back to stop the tax increase. Anthony was supposed to make a scene so that didn’t happen. He just got carried away once Ghost yelled at him in front of everyone. Nobody expected the outcome and nobody expected him to banish Anthony. It made Sal mad. He started trying to turn the other bosses against Ghost immediately. It was that same night that he met with the other bosses after we all left the restaurant. He called us all to his house and convinced us all we could overthrow Ghost.”

“All the bosses were there?” I asked. “You’re positive?”

“Everyone but Ghost. Everyone agreed. We got used to his absence. The bosses that wanted to raise taxes were irritated that he was going to try and stop them, so they readily agreed. Armando took the most convincing. He didn’t want to. He felt like there was another way. He didn’t completely agree that night, but he didn’t disagree either, if you know what I mean.” Dario’s eyes were still on me, like I was the only person in the room. The guys were all quiet. It almost felt like they were scared to move or speak. They didn’t want to break whatever spell he was under that was making him talk to me.

“What happened when Ghost banished Anthony?” I asked.

“That’s when the brawn operation went into motion. He needed chaos to get Anthony and Lorenzo back into the city. They made the plan for the assassination attempt at the ball, too. I assume that Armando tipped you off, since you’re all still here. Then we got word that you were in Italy, at Armando’s place. Sal tried to get all of you when he blew up Armando’s office. It was a warning to Armando, too. Sal knew he was trying to play both sides. Armando is a pu ssy, but he’s not completely stu pid. He has Sal’s goddaughter.”

“Giana is Sal’s goddaughter?” I asked.

“You know her?” Dario asked.

“I’ve met her, yes.”

“Sal was close to her grandfather. When she was born, they made Sal her godfather. Her father has made some poor business decisions, but Sal and Armando have been trying to help him get his fortune back. I heard Armando was sleeping with her, just to make Sal angry. She’s just insurance though. Armando has everyone fooled. Everyone thinks he’s the nice guy. Ask him where his first wife is and then tell me how nice he is,” he said. He crossed his arms across his chest, his gaze once again falling to the

Boor

“Oner Sal takes over the city, do you know what his plans are?” I asked. I was worried I was going to lose him, so I wanted to keep the conversation going, despite feeling like I needed a minute to process what he’d just told us

“He’ll get rid of the other bosses, I’m sure. He’s hungry for power. He was close to taking over the city when Vitaliy was still charge. That’s what made him divide the city up. That’s also what made him banish Lorenzo. It was punishment for Lorenzo, sure, but it was more to stick it to Sal for trying to overthrow him. Lorenzo and Sal were always really close. Vitally knew it would cause more damage to separate them than anything, so he banished Lorenzo to Sicily. For once, I agreed with Vitaliy I always hated Lorenin*

angry with Vitally over that and then Ghost banished Anthony as well, so he’s doubly ma

to me once more. “He’s angry with you now, You’re appvetly very

ki ll or kidnap. His goddaughter was supposed to get close to you to make it easier to grab you, but even that proved impossible. Armando is the one that tipped them off that day they tried to grab you, you know?”

“Sal isn’t the only one angry in this situation,” I said, somewhat under my breath. Dario still heard me. He chuckled. “I’ve never heard Sal so mad as I did when he found out you shot three of his guys that day. He managed to get one guy onto Armando’s security detail, but that guy disappeared. Nobody knows what happened to him.”

“I killed him too,” I said. My anger was now fully present, so holding my tongue was next to impossible for me.

Dario just looked at me, a sly smile on his face. “I would like to see the look on Sal’s face if he ever finds that out. You should be careful. He wanted to ki ll you before, but he’s angry enough now that he might try to sell you to highest bidder.”

“I would like to see him try,” I said. I stood up from the desk, not caring to keep this conversation going any further. I barely had a chance to take two steps away from Dario and Adrik was by my side.

“Take a breath, solnishko. You know we won’t let anything happen to you,” he said as he put both hands on my hips. He looked down at me, concerned, but I could also see the look in his eye that meant my eyes had gone dark. I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to regain control of myself.

Ivan moved closer to Dario. “What makes you think that Sal won’t know where to find you?” His voice had more of an edge to it this time, but he was still trying to be as calm as he could be.

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I have property around the world. I can move from place to place. I bought each place under a different name. The people in each town know me as a different person. It’s virtually impossible to follow me from place to place. Sal isn’t smart enough to link it all together.” He paused, like he was lost in thought again. He looked at Ivan, then looked at Adrik. “I want out. I’ve lost so much because of this life. I just want to be left alone. You will never hear from me again if you let me leave.” He sighed, looking at the floor. He knew that people rarely got out of this life alive. He knew more than most, as well, which made him dangerous. It also put him in danger.

Adrik looked down at me, his eyes searching mine. I was still angry, but I was trying to control it. Instead of waiting for my opinion, he said, “I don’t have a problem with you getting out, but I can’t let you leave until I’ve taken care of the other bosses. You’ll be safe here. No one knows you’re here. You’ll be protected until this is over, then you can leave, but not before. If you try to leave, my men will have orders to ki ll you. Understood?”

Dario nodded his head. He looked to the floor, almost like he was defeated, but then his eyes shot back to Adrik. “Wait, you’ll really let me leave once this is over?” Adrik nodded his head. “You can leave, with the understanding that if I ever hear of you trying to move against me, you’ll be swiftly dealt with. If you want to disappear, I won’t stand in the way of that. It’s time you had something to look forward to in life, Dario. You can leave once this is over,” he said. I glanced down at Dario. There were tears in his eyes.

“I’ll tell you anything you want to know if it means I can leave. Right now, I don’t even care that there’s a chance you’ll ki ll me after I tell you everything. You’ve given me hope that there’s a chance I can get

. I haven’t had hope since my parents died,” he said, quietly.

“As long as you stay loyal to me, you have my word that no harm will come to you. You’ll be able to leave. Betray me and I will ki ll you, Adrik said flatly.

“You’ll protect me until this is over?” Darlo asked.

“It won’t be the most luxurious of accommodations, but we have somewhere to hide you that no one knows about. You’ll be

here, You’ll have guards. You’ll have everything you need until this is over,” Viktor said.

tears that were threatening to fall were now flowing down the old man’s face. He looked relieved. Haunted, but relieved.

“Thank you,” he said, looking at Adrik and me. Adrik simply nodded his head toward Dario, while he pulled me a little closer, holding me just a little tighter.

Chapter Two Hundred Sixty-Seven

Sephie

Viktor and Ivan left with Dario to get him set up in a room, where he would stay until we were sure it was safe for him to leave. I knew they had holding cells on the other side of the floor. It's where Andy currently was. But apparently, there was another set of "rooms" that even 1 didn't know about. Dario would remain there, completely out of sight of anyone who came to this floor. Armando knew about the holding cells where Andy was, but he didn't know about the ones where they were taking Dario.

Once Viktor and Ivan were back in the office, we decided to move to the penthouse. Suddenly, we weren't completely comfortable having a conversation in the office anymore. We wanted as much privacy as possible. No one was allowed at the penthouse without permission from Adrik, which meant we were the only ones that ever went up there. It helped ease my mind that we always had guards outside the door, as well. It was looking like us against the world,

"Trino needs to know that Sal and Armando have been working together," Ivan said as we walked toward the kitchen. I might as well make dinner while we talked. It would help me stay calm and I'd grown to love being able to take care of the guys. They meant everything to me. Being able to feed them was a small way of showing them just how much.

"Agreed," Adrik said. He caught my arm as I was walking to the refrigerator, pulling me back to him. "Let's call him first. I don't think this can wait," he said as he pulled his phone from his pocket. We all stood close so that we could hear the conversation. I felt myself getting nervous. The feeling got worse with each ring. Trino wasn't picking up. Trino always picked up. Something wasn't right.

1 glanced at Misha, who had that faraway look in his eye. When he came back to the present, he glanced at me. He looked worried, but not as worried as I felt. "Something's happening, but it doesn't feel like it's all bad," Misha said.

I walked to Misha, grabbing his hand. "Did you see anything specific or you just have a general feeling?" As soon as he looked down at me, I could see what he saw. This is new. I know my eyes went wide, just as his did. He saw Trino, in trouble, but he also saw him get out unharmed.

"How did you just do that, gazelle?" Misha asked, completely shocked.

"Do what?" everyone asked at once. We glanced at the other guys, who looked worried, but curious.

"She just looked in my head and saw what I saw," Misha said. He was still holding my hand tightly, like he was afraid to let go.

"What did you see?" Ivan asked. I could hear their voices. I was present for the conversation, but it was also like I wasn't totally there. I was still watching Trino somehow. Misha kept glancing at me. He knew I was still watching because he could still see it too. I felt Adrik step closer to me, but he was apprehensive about touching me. I could feel that he didn't want to interrupt whatever the he ll was happening. I felt Misha grab my other hand and hold it tightly as well.

I was watching Trino trying to get out of his house. He was under heavy gunfire. His men were deadly, but they were outnumbered. Martin was with him, too. I could see outside the house. I could see the men that had surrounded the house.

"Where's Massimo, Anthony, and Lorenzo?" I asked in my head. I didn't think I said it out loud, but Misha answered me. "He keeps them at a different location," he said. I surveyed the scene again. There was a way to get out at the back of the house, but they were going to need help getting there. There were sections to the house. Trino, Martin, and their men had made it as far back as they could, but they were cut off from the exit. "They need help," I thought. As soon as I had that thought, there was an explosion that made me jump. I still felt Misha's hands gripping mine tightly and I heard him say, "no, don't. She's okay, just startled."

The explosion was exactly what Trino and his guys needed to make a quick exit. The explosion put a barrier between them and the men that were trying to get to them. I could see them make it safely to their exit, not wasting any time. They ran down hill, to waiting vehicles. Once they were in the vehicles, speeding away, everything went blank and I could see Misha standing in front of me again. He was still holding both of my hands tightly in his. I looked up at him, mostly confused at what just happened. His expression mirrored what I felt.

"What the fu ck was that?" I asked. Misha laughed at me. "I was hoping you'd know, gazelle," he said. "I feel like you just hijacked my brain."

I felt Adrik's hand on my back, no longer apprehensive to break whatever spell I was under. Now I felt his concern. "Solnishko…" he said, tentatively.

"I'm okay. Pretty sure, anyway. Trino's okay, too. But if you really want to fu ck with his head, send him a text telling him to call you when he makes it to safety," I said, giggling.

Misha pulled me to him, hugging me tightly. "You're a little bit evil, gazelle."

I stepped back from Misha, looking at the very surprised and very concerned faces of the guys. Adrik pulled me to him, a questioning look on his face. "I have no idea what just happened, but I saw Trino under attack, basically. They had him. surrounded in his house. Then there was an explosion and they maile it out. You saw all that too, didn't you?" I asked Misha.

He nodded his head. "But you left out the part where you caused the explosion," he said grinning at me.

"I did no such thing," I said.

"I saw it, gazelle. You clearly said, 'they need help' and then then kitchen exploded."

"We all heard you say it," Ivan said.

"You guys heard that? I just thought that in my head. I didn't think I said it out loud," I said, feeling even more confused. "1 could still hear Misha, but I didn't hear anybody else."

"Do you know who it was that was after Trino?" Ivan asked, looking at Misha.

"Not for sure, no. My best guess is that it was the Mexicans. There was a whole lot of Spanish being spoken that I didn't understand," he said.

They all looked to me. "Don't look at me. I only know curse words in Spanish. There were plenty of those being thrown around, but that doesn't give us any valuable information here."

Misha, who shared my love of comedy probably more than any of the others, said, "does this mean you're going to drop in my head regularly? That could prove to be awkward. Can you give me a warning or something? Make sure I'm wearing pants, at least? I'm very shy." He crossed his legs and crossed his arms over his crotch like he was blocking me from seeing something I shouldn't.

We all laughed. Adrik looked down at me, his deep blue eyes laughing as he let me search his eyes.

"I think she needs to touch you to make It happen, anyway. It started as soon as she grabbed your hand," Stephen sald. "It got stronger when you grabbed her other hand. So just wear gloves when you want her to stay out of your head. You'll be fine," he said, completely straight fa ced, which caused us all to laugh again.

Adrik's phone rang. He pulled it from his pocket, putting it on speaker for us all to hear. "Trino, what happened?" he asked.

"Jefe… Trino still sounded almost out of breath. "I almost didn't make it out. Guys from one of the Mexican cartels tried to take me out. The only reason I'm talking to you right now is because my kitchen exploded. It gave us enough cover to make it out the back. The entire house blew as we were running down the hill. I don't know what happened or what faulty gas line caused it, but I'm thankful for whatever that was."

"You're sure it was the cartels?" Adrik asked.

"Positive. This has to be Anthony and Lorenzo."

"Where are they?"

"I'm still holding them at a different location. This house was one I only use occasionally, but I've met with Tony and Enzo there a couple times. They had to have given the information to the cartels on where it was," he said. "They're dead men."

"Looks like war is coming. If you take care of Tony and Enzo, do you think the cartels will stop?" Adrik asked.

"Oh, they'll stop. They're all going to d ie, too. We had an agreement that they would stay out of Colombia and I would stay out of Mexico. Since they didn't stay out of Colombia, I'm not staying out of Mexico. They suffered greatly on my rise to power. They're going to get a reminder of what happened the last time they tried to cross me." Trino's voice was dripping with anger.

"Once the situation here is under control, we're here to help you as much as you need," Adrik said.

"Jefe, thank you. I might need some help. How are things there? Did you find out more about that puta Armando? What about Dario? What did you decide on him?"

"Don't trust Armando. He's in deep with Sal and has been for years. Giana is Sal's goddaughter, even. It's a giant mess. It's easier to just get rid of all of them. As for Dario, he's being held until this is all over. I'm fine with letting him go once the other bosses are out of the picture. That guy needs a happy ending to his fu cked-up life," Adrik said, sighing.

There was silence for a moment on the other end of the line. Trino took in a deep breath, exhaling loudly. "Jefe, I'm glad you decided that. I would've supported whatever decision you made on him, but you're right. He needs something good for once." Trino's voice had softened as he talked about Dario. I could clearly hear the sympathy he had for that old man. "The others, though? I'm going to have to get creative on how I want to end them."

"If anybody can wow us, it's you," Adrik said.

Chapter Two Hundred Sixty-Eight

Adrik

Once Trino and I ended the call, we all stood in stunned silence for a few moments. Not only had Dario dropped heavy information on us, but Sephie and Misha had seen what happened to Trino, seemingly as it was happening. How?

Sephie was still standing next to me, tucked into my side like she was made for that spot. I had a tight hold of her, feeling even more protective than usual of her. I'd lost count of how many times I'd told her that she was the most amazing woman I'd ever known, but she continued to raise the bar on that standard. I found myself curious to see what else she could do.

I glanced at Misha, who was still stunned at what had happened. He had his hands on his hips and was staring at the floor in front of him like he wasn't sure what to do or say.

"Misha, how does your gut instinct usually work? Can you normally see things as they happen?" I asked him.

He snapped back to reality when I called his name. He looked to me, then to Sephie, then back to me. "I get snapshots of what's going to happen, but it's like still pictures. When Sephie was holding my hands, it was a full-on movie. In real-time, apparently." He still looked stunned and almost baffled at what had happened. We all were, really.

I looked down at Sephie, who looked back at me. "Don't look at me. I have no explanation," she said. She looked just as stunned as Misha did.

I caught Ivan's eye, then looked back at Misha. "If I've learned anything from Sephie, it's that she shows you what your potential is," I said. "She shows you how to get to the next level, if you will. Think of her like the Game Master."

She looked up at me, smiling. "Calling me the Game Master implies I know what the he ll this game is that's happening with all of us. I'm in the dark just as much as the rest of you."

"I think you're selling yourself short, spider monkey. You might not be completely conscious of what's happening, but you feel literally everything around you. I could tell you were anxious before Boss called Trino. It got worse when he didn't answer. It got worse still when Misha had the same reaction. You know more than you think you do, Sephie," Andrei said. Sephie looked at Andrei, but didn't know how to respond. She was chewing on her bottom lip; her hands were starting to fidget as well.

"I saw her eyes go dark this time when she was talking to Dario, too," Ivan said. Stephen nodded beside him. "I did too," he said.

I felt her anger rise quickly at the mention of the conversation with Dario, but she had it under control just as quickly as it appeared. She looked at Ivan.

"Holy sh it, I see it now," Viktor said. Sephie looked to me quickly, confused. "Blink, love," I said, kissing her temple. Her eyes were as dark as I'd seen them, but she felt completely calm to me. She closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. I got hit with a sudden feeling of panic that I knew wasn't mine. When she opened her eyes and looked to me for confirmation they were normal again, I could see the fear in her eyes.

"What the f**k is happening to me?" she asked quietly. Her feeling of panic was growing. She was an expert at controlling her anger, but her fear was clearly a different story. She was losing control quickly. I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her tight against me. She clung to me like I was her lifeline to reality.

"Princess, you joked that your eyes going dark was your villain origin story, but I think it's exactly the opposite. I think it's your hero origin story. We may not know what happened just now, but you're doing what you always do- making sure that people you care about are taken care of. That's hero behavior," Ivan said. She took a deep breath, but didn't loosen her grip on me. Her face was still buried in my chest.

"Didn't your dad tell you that you were here to help each one of us with something important?" I asked her, trying to coax her head away from my chest. Not that I minded her body pressed against mine. I just didn't want her to be scared. She nodded her head.

"He did?" Misha asked. She nodded again, but this time she looked up at me. The look of fear was slowly disappearing. She turned so she could look at Misha, but she kept my arms wrapped tightly around her.

"He told me I was supposed to help you develop your gift, my adorable Russian guardian," she said, looking at Misha. She then looked at Andrei. "Bubba, we're apparently here to make each other better. It's why you're so good at pushing me and training me to be better and why I'm constantly reminding you of how awesome you are." Andrei's wide smile stretched across his face. She looked at Stephen and said, "Yoden, I was supposed to show you how much better life can be when you just decide to be yourself." Stephen's cheeks blushed, as he ran his hand through his hair. "And Papa Bear," she said, looking at Viktor. "I was supposed to help you get your confidence back. You do a very good job of hiding it from everyone else, but I know how debilitating it was becoming for you since you lost your wife." Viktor looked at her, smiling. She really had helped him feel much more confident since she'd come into our lives. I hadn't noticed it much before Sephie, but Viktor was back to the way he was when I first met him. He'd lost his light before Sephie, but she was the spark he needed to remember who he was and how great he was at his job.

"What about Ivan?" Misha asked. Sephie looked at Ivan. I could tell by the look on his face that she was smiling at him. His face always got softer when she smiled at him. She glanced up at me and held my gaze. She was silently asking my thoughts on whether she should tell them everything. I nodded once.

She sighed, then walked to Ivan. "Ivan and I have a special deal. My dad explained it like this: there are different types of soulmates. Adrik and I are meant to find each other and fall in love over and over again in many lifetimes. I don't think any of you are surprised by that," she said, laughing. "I don't know how many lifetimes I've spent with the rest of you, but Ivan gets the role of my protector in each one. He proved he was ready the day Sal's guys tried to grab me when he used his body to shield me from the impact of the truck that hit us." She had put her arms around his waist as she was talking, with her head resting on his shoulder. He held her tightly, kissing the top of her head.

"I nominate Stephen to document each future version of us that he meets in his one extremely long lifetime," Misha said. The smile that Sephie gave him was enough to make the room twice as bright. She squeezed Ivan then ran to Misha, laughing. He picked her up and swung her around. Her squeal was music to my ears.

"I love that you're as much of a dork as I am, Misha," she said as he set her down.

"He definitely wasn't this much of a dork before you came along. You brought it to the surface," Andrei said, laughing. "Just like you did with the rest of us."

"I mean, I'll apologize if you don't like it, but I happen to love it. You're all much more entertaining this way," she said, walking back to me.

"Don't you dare apologize for it," I said, pulling her to me forcefully causing her to giggle as she wrapped her arms around my neck. She pressed her lips to mine, still laughing against my lips.

"Come on, I'll get started on dinner," she said, pulling me back toward the kitchen.

"We can order takeout, sestrichka. It's been a long day for everyone." Viktor said.

"Papa Bear, if you haven't figured out by now, feeding you is how I show all of you just how much I love you," she said, her swert smile on her face.

Andrei pushed his stomach out to give himself a belly. "So Much Love," he said, as he rubbed his pretend belly.

Chapter Two Hundred Sixty-Nine

Adrik

The next morning, the guys were back in the penthouse early. We had agreed the night before that we didn't trust anyone else. so all conversations between us were to be had in Russian and in the penthouse when possible. Sephie struggled to wake up this morning. She was so exhausted last night that she was sound asleep almost immediately after laying across my chest. I can't take the blame for her tiredness this morning. Whatever happened between her and Misha completely zapped her energy. Not to mention dealing with the stress of everything Dario told us.

When I came out of the bedroom without her, the guys were noticeably concerned. I smiled at their concern for her. "She's awake. She's still getting ready. She was exhausted last night and struggled to wake up this morning," I said.

"Same," Misha said as he walked to the coffee maker. "I'm starting to understand why you both needed extra coffee the day after whatever happened between you two that zapped you both. I feel like I could sleep for three days right now,"

"It only lasted a day for me. Hopefully, you'll be the same," I said, laughing at his exhausted expression. He looked like he could barely keep his eyes open.

Viktor pulled his phone from his pocket, typed a short message, then put his phone back in his pocket. "Breakfast will be here shortly," he said. "Although I can tell you right now that I'm not going to enjoy it as much." We all laughed at his crankiness over not getting Sephie's cooking.

Sephie walked into the kitchen just as Misha was pouring her a cup of coffee. "Perfect timing, gazelle. You're going to need this," he said as he handed her the coffee mug. "I might've made it a little strong. Apologies if it's too strong."

"Are you as exhausted as you look and I feel, my adorable Russian guardian?" she asked. He nodded. "What the f**k happened yesterday," she whispered as she sipped the coffee.

"I can't answer that yet, but I did get more recordings from Keith last night. Armando is back from his house as of late last night. Keith sent over what he had from this weekend. He said Armando met with Ricardo, but didn't close the door this time. Keith thinks Armando wasn't aware that he was there. After what Dario told us, I'm not sure I believe the bumbling id iot persona of Armando anymore, so it might've been intentional. It's possible he's caught on to Keith recording his meetings somehow and now he's feeding us false information, but we won't know until we get them translated," Stephen said.

Sephie sighed. "I'll get started after I finish breakfast," she said.

"Breakfast is on its way, spider monkey. Viktor already took care of it. You need a break this morning, Game Master," Andrei said, grinning at her.

She looked at Viktor, her sweet smile that made him melt on her face. "Papa Bear, you're my favorite. Don't tell the others."

Sephie listened to everything Keith had sent over from Armando's meetings over the weekend after breakfast. She had a serious look on her face listening to one of the recordings. She kept replaying it over and over again like she was trying to hear something else on the recording. Stephen had given her headphones again to help her hear more clearly. She finally looked at Stephen, then looked to Viktor. "There's not much that's useful from Armando's meetings, but in this one recording, I can hear Giana talking in the background for just a minute, like she's walking by on the phone or something. It sounds like she asks when she can go back to Italy, then it sounds like she says it wasn't her fault. She must walk too far away because I lose her voice for a few minutes, but she comes back through. She's still talking, but it's too jumbled for me to be able to hear what she says clearly when she comes back through."

"There's a way to separate the voices on the recording." Viktor said, "I'll be right back," he said, walking quickly toward the door.

"What about his meeting with Ricardo this time?" Stephen asked.

"Um, let's see. They talked about Ricardo needing to see a doctor for his knee. They talked about the weather, then they talked about how nice it would be to go to a tropical island because it's getting colder here, then they talked about Ricardo needing to pick up his clothes from the cleaners. Oh, f**k me they're talking in code aren't they?" she said, putting her hand on her forehead as she realized what she'd been listening to.

We couldn't help but chuckle at her. She really was tired. Normally she was very quick to catch on to such things. "It's likely it was code, solnishko. Can you tell me exactly what they said?" I asked.

"I'm gonna need more coffee," she said as she put the earphones back in and started the recording again. She started writing the conversation out right away.

Viktor came back with his computer to try and separate Giana's voice from the others on the recording. She handed Stephen his phone back once she was done, then handed me the translation from the meeting with Ricardo. Ivan got up to move closer to me so he could read the translation as well. Andrei got up and made Sephie another cup of coffee while everyone was busy.

It didn't take Viktor and Stephen long to get Giana's voice separated from the others, so we could hear her more clearly. Sephie went to listen to what she previously couldn't understand. "I was right on the first two. She asks when she can go back to Italy, then says it wasn't her fault. She sounds angry on the last part. She says, "I'm not a child. You're lucky I'm still here. The longer you leave me here, the more likely I'm going to disappear."

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"If she's been a plant all along, she might be tired of the game. Armando has been using her, he may or may not have gotten her hooked on coke, and we all ha te her now, so maybe her plan to rob him is really her plan to get away from Armando and her family," Stephen said.

I looked to Misha, to see if he had any thoughts on potential outcomes, but he was still so tired that there was little to no chance he'd be able to see anything. Sephie saw me look toward Misha, then saw the look on his face and giggled. "I don't think it will work on her. Not with the level of hatred Misha has for her. That's going to cloud the outcome," she said, smiling at him.

"She deserves whatever she gets," Misha said flatly.

Ivan, who had been looking over Sephie's translation from Armando and Ricardo's conversation, said, "I think Stephen was right. The persona of Armando as a bumbling id iot is exactly the opposite of how he really is. He fooled all of us. Unless they've changed their codes, they're talking about a hit on Trino, although I can't tell who ordered the hit from what they said. They're just discussing it."

"Shi t," Sephie said. "Could they be referring to what happened last night? When did Keith record this one?" she asked Stephen.

He checked his phone. "It was before they got to Trino, so that adds up. They wouldn't have known it was unsuccessful at this point," he said.

I felt my own anger rising to the surface, but I immediately felt Sephie's almost overtaking mine. I glanced to her, worried she was about to lose control, but once again, she looked completely calm. She looked to me, her eyes completely dark. "I know," she said, indicating that she was in control and was aware her eyes were likely dark. "I'm still not over Dario's comment about Sal and Armando fighting over me before you came back. I need a minute to be angry about that complete and utter bu llsh it, as well as being wrong about Armando."

I couldn't help but laugh at her response. The guys did too. Stephen looked at her, completely straight-faced and said, "maybe your milkshake really does bring all the boys to the yard, Seph."

That was all it took to make her laugh and I felt her anger subside. When she looked at me again, her eyes were back to their normal three colors. I was becoming more and more impressed with her level of control of her anger. Her eyes only changed colors when she was a raging inferno internally, but from the outside, she looked completely calm and in control. I could only tell she was angry because I could feel it, not because she looked it. Other than her dark eyes. My Game Master was showing me how to increase my own anger to in sane levels while remaining in control of it. I felt her cool hand on my face, breaking me free from my thoughts. She searched my eyes for a moment, finding the answer to her silent question of what had me distracted, She just grinned at me, standing on her toes to kiss me. God, I love her.

Chapter Two Hundred Seventy

Adrik

I had Sephie call Chen before we moved down to my office for my schedule to begin that day. We had also decided last night that we were going to move quickly on shutting down the brawn operations, as well as grabbing Dr. Moretti. Those two things needed to happen at once. After that, I was going to move against the bosses that were in the city before they had a chance to realize what had happened.

I'd been quiet up to this point on purpose. It made me look weak and unsure of making a move against the other bosses. I was trying to lull them into a false sense of security. It was exactly the opposite of what my father would have done. My father was brutal in his rule. He made rash decisions and unleashed chaos quickly. He was effective only because he's a smart man, but he was more like a tyrant than a king.

I took a different approach. I gave my opponents time and enough rope to hang themselves usually. I wanted to know their plans. All of their plans, because when I ended them, I didn't want to have to deal with tying up any loose ends. I had ended complete family lines before. When I made a move, it was utterly devastating. But it was focused devastation. With my father, there was always plenty of collateral damage. I always tried to keep that to a minimum. Innocent people didn't need to get hurt in the process.

It was time to unleash my own brand of chaos on the other bosses. We'd decided days ago on how to hit the three brawn operations in the city. We needed the help of the dealers, though. It was a large enough operation that we couldn't do it ourselves. Not if we wanted it to happen simultaneously, anyway. We decided it was best to recruit the dealers to help us, especially with the two smaller warehouses that were producing brawn. Now, we needed to fill them in on the plan.

"Sephie, you're calling early, my girl. Should I be happy you're thinking of me so early or worried you're delivering bad news?" Chen asked when he answered the phone.

Sephie laughed. "I guess it depends on your definition of bad news, Chen."

"What's up, my girl?" he asked as he was laughing at her response.

"We need to set up another meeting with Gus and DJ. We're going to need help taking out the warehouses," she said. "We also need to move quickly. Do you think you can get them to the same place tonight? Sorry for the late notice, but things are escalating."

"Oh, we heard about the attempt on Trino. Gus called him for something else and found out about it last night. I've been expecting you to call, actually. I can get them both there tonight. In the absence of Smith and Chucky, there's been a new guy that's stepped up to help. He's one of Trino's dealers. Do you want him too or just Gus and DJ?"

"Bring the new guy, please. I need to meet him. It's likely okay if he belongs to Trino, but I want to make sure," she said.

"I think you'll be alright with him. He's like Gus's number 2 guy, but I'll make sure he's there too. See you and your gigantic security force tonight, my girl," he said.

"Thanks, Chen. You're the best," she said, as she ended the call. She looked slightly apprehensive as she gave Viktor his phone back. "I'm nervous about new people now," she said, chewing her bottom lip.

"Don't be nervous, spider monkey. You still have one of the highest success rates I've ever seen when it comes to figuring people out. Armando is a special case. Don't dwell on that one," Andrei said as he stretched his massive arm around her shoulders. She leaned into him, resting her head on his shoulder. She sighed, looking up at him. She was upset with herself for being wrong about Armando. She looked tiny standing next to Andrei. "Thanks, Bubba. It wasn't just Armando, though. Andy, too. I was wrong on two of the most important players in this," she said.

Misha, who was on his third cup of coffee, was finally starting to act like a human again. He looked at her, almost like he was angry with her. "Now is not the time to start doubting yourself, gazelle. You've been right more times than you've been wrong. And, technically, you weren't completely wrong on Andy. You never gave him the okay all the way. There's a reason those two were in your blind spot. We just have to figure out what your blind spot is so we can correct it going forward. But this doubting yourself shit stops right now."

We all turned and looked at him, surprised with the tone that he took with her. If it wasn't Misha, I might've been angry with him. However, I knew she needed to hear what he said. Andrei, always the protective older brother, pulled her closer to him, but he agreed with Misha. "He's right, Sephie. You can't start doubting yourself now. We need you."

"You two are no longer allowed to hang out with Ivan. I like to be able to argue with you and it irritates me when I can't," she said, grumpily.

Stephen left first with two other guys that night to set up before we arrived to meet with the dealers. Sephie's old apartment made it easy to cover all entrance and exit points. While I knew she didn't pick that apartment for that reason, I was still grateful she chose that apartment as it was making our lives easier right now.

Chen was in his apartment early once again, but Stephen said he was much less nervous this time. "He's only checked outside a couple times since we got in position. Last time, he was checking every 15 seconds," he said, laughing quietly.

kind of feel bad for him. He didn't know what he was signing up for," Sephie said.

She took Ivan and Misha and picked Chen up on her way upstairs. He was much more relaxed this time. We could hear him joking and laughing with her on their way up to her old apartment.

"Chen, it's good to see you again," I said when he walked into the apartment. I extended my hand to him. He grasped it firmly, giving me a small smile. "You too, sir," he said.

"Tell me about this new guy," Sephie said.

"His name is Oscar. He's been working with Gus for a few years now. They knew each other in Colombia; Oscar just came up here a few months ago. Gus trusts him and he says that Trino trusts him as well, but since I don't know Trino, I can't vouch for that statement," he said.

"What about DJ? He gets along with Oscar ok?" Sephie asked.

"Yeah, DJ likes him, but DJ generally likes everyone. He's been mostly quiet around you guys, but that dude has never met a stranger in his life. It's no wonder he knows everything going on in the city. He talks to literally everyone."

Sephie smiled at Chen, but was quietly contemplating meeting the new guy. She was still worried about being wrong. Misha noticed her look. He simply clicked his tongue at her, which caused her to look at him. He gave her a stern look. He had his hands on his hips and was tapping his pinky against his hip. It was exactly what she needed to break that thought pattern. She smiled widely at him, relaxing her shoulders.

"First up, DJ," Stephen said in our earpieces. Andrei and Viktor walked outside to greet him and pat him down, while Misha moved to the door. Ivan and I stood in front of Sephie. As we were waiting on D] to make it upstairs, Stephen announced the arrival of the other two. "Gus is here and I'm guessing that's Oscar with him."

Ivan and I instinctively moved closer to Sephie, given that we didn't know this new person. I would feel better once Viktor and Andrei checked him for weapons. We heard Viktor knock once. Misha opened the door for Gus and Oscar. Gus, as usual, found Sephie first, smiling at her before acknowledging anyone else in the room. I felt her hand find mine, timidly. She was still worried.

"Do I want to know what Trino has said about me this time?" she asked Gus after seeing his smile.

Gus laughed. "He sings your praises anytime he hears your name." He looked at me. "Yours too, sir. Trino doesn't like many people, but he likes both of you. It's very obvious to anyone who's known him for very long."

"I'm glad to hear that. I'm also very thankful that he made it out okay yesterday. That's one reason why we called you here. We need to move quickly. I'm worried that the Mexicans are going to start a war with Trino and I'd like to be able to offer my help. if that happens. I need to take care of the other bosses here first, though," I said. I glanced to Ivan who put his arm around Sephie's shoulders. I squeezed her hand once before walking toward Gus, DJ, and Oscar.

"I'm assuming you guys already have a plan for how to take out the warehouses?" Gus asked.

"Indeed. We'd like to hit them all at the same time, which makes it problematic for us. We need your help to make this simultaneous," I said.

"What are we talking about here? How are we ensuring the warehouses won't be a problem any longer? Fire? Raining bullets? Bombs? Flood of Biblical proportions? What's the catastrophe of choice?" Oscar asked.

Chapter Two Hundred Seventy-One

Adrik

I heard Sephie chuckle quietly behind me. I could feel her relaxing more now that she'd seen him speak. Andrei spoke up to answer his question. "Bombs. The two smaller warehouses are easily accessed. You guys will take care of those. The warehouse at the docks is crawling with Sal's people. It's going to be harder to get close enough to that one to plant explosives, so we'll take care of that one."

Oscar looked at Andrei. "You can make them all go boom at once. We can still plant the explosives on the smaller warehouses, but then be available to help at the docks. I've seen firsthand how many of Sal's guys are at the docks. That's a big job. You're going to need extra help there."

"Remote charges aren't as reliable as I'd like," Andrei said.

"You can confirm with Trino, because you shouldn't take my word for it, but I figured out a reliable system in Colombia for remote charges. Worked like a charm every time. I'll show you how. That's why Trino sent me here," Oscar said. "Then, we can set the smaller warehouses to go boom at exactly the same time as the one at the docks. Maximum chaos. That strategy is what helped Trino rise to power in Colombia."

"Of course Trino would send us his explosives expert," Sephie said in Russian. "If it turns out I was wrong about him, I'm going to kill him myself for making me like him so much."

We all laughed, which put the dealers at ease. "We'll check with Trino. No offense, of course," I said to Oscar.

"None taken, lefe. He told me to tell Sephie that my flair for the dramatic was almost as good as his should you question whether I was telling the truth," he said.

"Point in your favor, Oscar," Sephie said in English.

I grabbed her hand, pulling her to the bedroom while I called Trino to confirm Oscar was telling us the truth. This time, he picked up on the first ring. "Jefe, que pasa?"

"Trino, did you send your explosives expert up here?" I asked.

"Si, Jefe. Oscar. He's been one of my trusted guys for years. He was instrumental in my rise to power, too."

"Trino, if it turns out I was wrong about you and you're not this awesome in real life, I'm going to kill you myself for making me like you so f**king much," Sephie said. She sounded serious, but she had a wicked glint in her eye when she said it.

"Miha. I would never lie to you. I'm really this awesome. Maybe not as awesome as Jefe, but I need a goal to aspire to," he said, laughing. "I'm guessing you're moving forward on your plans to get rid of the brawn if you've met Oscar?"

"Yeah, I want to move quickly. I'm worried you're facing a war and want to be available to help. We should be able to move quickly. Brawn first, bosses next."

"Good. I could use Oscar when he's done there."

We ended the call soon after. Sephie looked more relaxed than she had when we first got to the apartment. "Your thoughts on Oscar so far?" I asked.

"I feel like he's telling the truth, but not just because Trino confirmed It for us. I think he can be trusted." she said. She was still feeling unsure, but I could also tell that she was trying to be confident. I pulled her to me, holding her tightly. "Misha and Andrei were right, love. You've been right more times than you've been wrong. I've come to rely on your unique set of skills and I still have complete confidence in them. When you can't feel confident in yourself, you can borrow mine," I said. I felt her inhale deeply and her body completely relaxed. She looked up at me, that spark that I love so much evident in her eyes. "Thank you," she said sweetly. She stood on her toes, pressing her lips to mine. She wrapped her arms around my neck, burying her face in my neck. She stayed there for a few moments before finally relaxing her hold on me. "We should get back," she said, reluctantly.

"One more minute," I said, pulling her back to me as she giggled at me. She didn't resist. She just rested her head against my chest as I held her close.

The guys had been working on revising the plan while Sephie and I were in the bedroom. They heard Trino's confirmation on the phone through their earpieces, so they knew Oscar could be trusted. He was giving Andrei a tutorial on how he set up remote detonation to work reliably when we walked back out to the living room.

Oscar looked to us, expectantly. Sephie smiled at him. "We appreciate you being here, Oscar. Especially given what Trino's facing at the moment. We promise to get you back to Colombia as quickly as possible. He's going to need you again," she said.

While Oscar had seemed relaxed the entire time he'd been in the apartment, he was visibly relieved that he got Sephie's approval. "Trino told me how important your opinion of me was. I'm glad I'm in," he said, smiling broadly at her.

"Knowing Trino, he also told you what will happen if you ever betray us. Whatever he told you, I can guarantee it was not an embellishment," she said. She crossed her arms across her chest, looking at him seriously.

Oscar laughed. "He did tell me. I'm not that stupid. You have nothing to worry about," he said as he went back to the conversation with Andrei about how to set up the detonators.

We eventually came to an agreement on a new plan for the three warehouses. The only variable we weren't entirely sure on yet was Sephie. Ivan and I had discussed it briefly before, but neither of us liked the options we came up with. We had discussed leaving Ivan with her at the penthouse, but that left them vulnerable and we needed him at the warehouse. He briefly discussed bringing her with us, but I wasn't happy about that plan either. I didn't like the idea of putting her in danger just to keep her close to me. She hadn't brought it up again, but I knew she was still worrying about it.

After the dealers left the apartment, Ivan brought the subject up once more. We needed to make a decision. "The biggest question now is what to do with the princess during this," he said.

She glanced nervously at him, then to me. "What are the options?" she asked. She was definitely still worried about it. We could all see it written all over her face.

"So far, we've only come up with two options. I stay at the penthouse with you or you come with us. I can't say I'm happy about either option," Ivan said.

"But they need you. You can't stay behind," she said immediately. It was no surprise that she was thinking of the guys before she was thinking of herself. She started to chew on her lip as she tried to come up with a solution. "What if you took me to the house and left me there? No one will know where I am. There are plenty of guards. I'll be safe there."

"Absolutely not. I'm not leaving you alone," I said.

"Then that only leaves one option," she said.

Stephen, in his quiet way, said, "this might be a big help to us. She's a hell of a shot. She's fast and she can easily defend herself. It's not like she's going to be deadweight if she comes with us."

"I was just thinking the same thing," Andrei said. "I would be more worried about her if she wasn't with us. With us, we all know she's going to do just as much damage as we could do and we know where she is at all times."

Viktor also agreed with Stephen and Andrei. "You know I don't like anyone to be distracted. We would all be distracted if she wasn't with us," he said. "She's been training with us for long enough now. She can handle herself and we'll be able to keep an eye on her, the same as we keep an eye on each other."

I inhaled deeply. They were right. I just didn't want to put her in danger because I couldn't leave her alone. I ran my hand through my hair, looking at the floor. I was still struggling with the decision. I felt her hand in mine. "Misha, what do you think?" she asked.

I watched as he ran through possibilities in his mind. He clearly looked nauseous. "What was that one? That was a definite no whichever one it was," she said.

"That was you and Ivan staying at the penthouse. I think you're coming with us, gazelle," he said. Just to make sure, he ran through that possibility in his head, that faraway look in his eye once more. He ran his hands quickly over his arms, his upper body shuddering with the goosebumps he was obviously feeling. That settles that.

I looked down at Sephie. She looked unsure, but she wasn't arguing with the decision either. She had the same look when the guys were trying to talk her into going up against Mike. She easily dominated in that situation. I had faith in her abilities. They were right; it would be better to know she was safe with us rather than worrying about her while we were away from her. I smiled to myself thinking about how protective they'd all come to be of her. She meant so much to all of us. We would do everything in our power to ensure she was always safe

Chapter Two Hundred Seventy-Two

Stephen

We were in the penthouse going over the plan one last time before we left the building. Our nerves were on edge, but Sephie's more so than the rest of us. We were trying to reassure her as much as we could, but I knew that adrenaline was going to prove useful once the chaos started. She could shoot better than a majority of the guards we had on staff. She was hell in the ring. She also had six attack dogs ready to rip anyone apart that dared to look at her the wrong way.

I found myself thinking about just how much she'd come to mean to me lately. I'd never been close to anyone my entire life. I didn't have many friends growing up. I was always the quiet kid. That carried over into my adult life. When I figured out I was gay, I retreated even further into my shell. It took me years to tell my parents. There were members of my family that still didn't know. It was much more accepted now, but my family was very traditional. It was just easier to come up with reasons. why I wasn't married with kids yet than it was to have the conversation with them about the truth.

I had resigned myself to keeping that secret from the other guys forever. They were all alpha males. I expected them to have a huge problem with it. I was worried they would see me as weak. My perspective changed when Sephie came along. She was always unapologetically herself and the other guys loved her more because of it. It took me a long time to warm up to her, simply because I was worried she would figure out my secret and tell the others. But the more I tried to put distance between me and Sephie, the more she found ways to show me that being myself was the best way to be. In her own special way, she coaxed me out of my own darkness that I'd put myself in..

As it turns out, she did figure out my secret before the other guys, but she didn't tell anyone. She even swore Adrik to secrecy when she told him. She let me tell them in my own time. And they accepted me even more than they already did once I told them. Secrets kept in the dark can destroy you, but secrets brought to the light have no power over you anymore.

We were gearing up, almost ready to leave. I saw Viktor catch Sephie alone. It looked like he was giving her a pep talk. He'd been worried about bringing her with us, as he ultimately felt responsible for all of us, all the time. But he didn't like the idea of leaving her behind, either. I was sure she was going to be an asset, so I was happy she was coming along. Andrei was right, we'd all be worried about her if she wasn't with us.

We knew our individual roles. Sephie was to stick with Ivan or Adrik if something was to happen to Ivan. The rest of us would step in, when and if needed. Misha was certain that it was going to work out for the best. Our plan was solid. Oscar had provided valuable information on how to make the original plan even better, so we were expecting things to go smoothly.

We walked off the elevator toward the vehicles. We were taking a combination of SUVs and bikes, just in case we needed options. It would also be more difficult to separate us if we had more vehicles. The dealers that were helping us were going to meet us at Sephie's old apartment. Chen had come to the building, with instructions on how to get to the parking garage underneath the building without anyone seeing him. He was taking another SUV, just to add more vehicles to the party. He was waiting on us when we exited the elevator.

"Who's ready to have New Year's celebrations early?" he asked as we got closer to him. He had a good sense of humor, and like Sephie, tended to make jokes when he was nervous. We were all in mission mode, however. His face fell when nobody laughed. "Right. Jokes later," he said, clearing his throat.

Viktor had brought a few guys from the building security team on as well. They were all guys that had been working for us for years. We'd used them before for various things. They knew how to handle themselves and we could trust them. We knew that the two smaller warehouses should be easy to get to, but the warehouse at the docks was covered with armed guards. Even with all the extra people, we were going to be outnumbered.

I had scouted the warehouse at the docks and found a suitable nest where I could even the playing field as much as possible. They wouldn't see us coming, hopefully.

The dealers were waiting at Sephie's old apartment when we got there. The security detail guys had already gone ahead to the two smaller warehouses to get eyes on them. We grabbed the dealers and went to the first warehouse. Conversation was minimal. Our guys had earpieces, like usual, but the dealers didn't.

We pulled up a few blocks from the first warehouse. This was the smallest of the warehouses. They were running the operation 24/7, but there weren't that many people in the warehouse. Only enough to make the brawn along with a handful of guards and that was it. Our plan was to get the explosives attached to the building in strategic spots and get out without being seen. Because this one was an easier job, only a few guys were needed to get everything in place. Andrei and Oscar went with two other guys. The rest of us waited as backup if needed.

Before they left, Sephie had to hug Andrei. She was trying to be tough, but she couldn't help herself. If anything, it was motivation for him to make it back. While the rest of us didn't have a romantic relationship with her like Adrik, there was still a special relationship between her and the five of us. If ever there was unconditional love, Sephie was it. She was something. special in our lives and not a single one of us wanted to give that up.

Andrei, Oscar, and the other two guys jogged toward the warehouse. It was approaching midnight, so we had the cover of darkness to help conceal our movements. We could hear everything through the earpieces, but there wasn't much to listen to. Communication was kept to an absolute minimum.

It took maybe 20 minutes and the four guys were jogging back to us. We all chuckled when Sephie exhaled loudly as soon as she saw Andrei come into view. Ivan put his arm around her shoulders, smiling down at her. It was nice to have someone worried for your safety.

We loaded up quickly and drove to the second warehouse. It was much the same as the first. In and out with no problems. We were ahead of schedule on our way to the warehouse at the docks.

I was going to set up in my nest, silently taking out as many of the guards around the perimeter as I could. When I was scouting, I counted at least 10 that I could easily pick off. Once the first line of defense had been neutralized, the rest of the guys were going to come in on foot. This warehouse was almost three times the size of the other two. It was going to need. more explosives to blow completely. I could only cover one side of the warehouse from above. Two sides were on the water. The third wasn't accessible without announcing our presence. That made me nervous. I liked having a better vantage point, but I'd covered worse. I would make this work. I found myself feeling overly protective, not only of Sephie but of the other guys too. We really were a family. I was going to make sure we all made it out.

It only took me a few minutes to get into position. "Ready."

"Ready when you are," Viktor said.

Chapter Two Hundred Seventy-Three

Stephen

While it was somewhat macabre, I got enjoyment from counting out loud whenever I took out one of the guards. “One…two…three…” So far no one else in the warehouse had noticed. “Four…five…” Still business as usual in the warehouse. “Six, seven, eight…that last group shouldn’ta been f**king around on duty, but I appreciate them making my job easier.” I heard quiet. laughter over my earpiece. “Aaaaand…nine. Almost to a personal best, folks.” More laughter through my earpiece. “Oh, number ten found number nine. That’s not helpful, number ten. But wait, there’s more. Eleven…twelve…go. Now.”

I could see everyone moving from my vantage point. The people inside the warehouse were slowly becoming aware that something was going on. I was trying to pick them off as they came out of the building. Andrei and Oscar were systematically moving around the building, setting up the explosives. The two guys that went with them for the first two warehouses were moving in the opposite direction around the building. Everyone else was providing cover for them.

I kept an eye on as much as I could through the scope of my rifle. Things were happening quickly, I caught sight of one guy that had taken cover as he came out of the warehouse. He was on the phone. His call ended abruptly, thanks to me. “We may have a problem. Someone made a call. Everybody watch your 6.”

“One wall to go,” Andrei said.

The people inside the warehouse had barricaded themselves inside, thinking that was going to save them. I took a moment to find Sephie. She was between Adrik and Ivan, her gun pointed at the warehouse like she belonged here. She was one of us now.

I checked the alley leading to the warehouse. Quiet, so far. I could hear gunfire at the back of the warehouse, where Andrei and Oscar were. “Remind me to thank Trino for sending Oscar. He just saved my a ss,” Andrei said. “All charges set. On our way

back.”

I did another sweep of the perimeter. This time, there was movement up the alley. “We’ve got company. Their backup just arrived. Don’t know how many yet, but I’ll try to get as many as I can. They’re coming up the alley,” I said.

I counted five guys trying to quickly make it to the warehouse. They were being smart about moving up the alley, so I couldn’t, get a clear shot. Whoever made the call must’ve warned them I was here. “They’re on to me. It’s difficult for me to get a clear shot on any of them.” I looked further down the alley to see more guys coming. “More guys coming too. I count 15 total. So far. I need help drawing them out so I can get a clean shot. They’re using cover as much as possible. Oops. Make that 14.”

Misha and Viktor moved closer to the alley, along with several of the security detail guys to try and keep the new group from advancing any closer. The alley was the easiest entrance point. The pressure from Misha and Viktor caused the new arrivals to make mistakes, which gave me a clear shot. “Down to 11. I haven’t seen anymore coming yet. I also haven’t checked the other access points. Be careful down there.” As soon as I said that, I heard Ivan say, “we’ve got more coming from the west side.”

Shi t. That’s directly beside where Ivan, Adrik, and Sephie were. “How many? Can you tell?” I asked.

“Looks like just a handful. We should be able to hold them off. Andrei’s back,” he said.

There was steady gunfire in both directions now. I was slowly working on picking off the guys in the alley. I checked on the group coming from the other direction, toward Ivan. I couldn’t get a clear shot on any of them. I went back to the alley just in time to see more guys arrive. “Shi t. We’ve got more incoming up the alley. At least 20 this time.”

“Almost clear this way, but I don’t like that more are showing up. We need to get out of here,” Ivan said.

“We can go around the warehouse,” Andrei said.

“I can’t cover you that way,” I said.

“You won’t need to. I can blow the building as soon as we’re clear. Bait the rest of the guys toward the building, we won’t have to worry about being followed,” Andrei said.

“We’ll do it. Ivan, get Sephie out of here. Stephen, cover Ivan and Sephie as far as you can. The rest of us are going around the warehouse. Andrei will detonate as soon as we’re clear,” Adrik said.

No one had time to object. Ivan grabbed Sephie’s hand and was moving quickly toward the exit to the west. It was clear. There was a bike close, so they’d be able to leave quickly. Misha and Viktor were falling back toward the rest of the group, drawing the guys in the alley toward them. Everyone moved together, slowly, toward the back of the warehouse. I covered Ivan and Sephie until they got on the bike, then I lost sight of them. I went back to covering the alley. I managed to get a few more guys, but I would need to move soon or I’d be caught in the blast.

“Stephen, get out of there,” Adrik said as they neared the back of the warehouse.

“You ain’t gotta tell me twice,” I said, laughing to myself.

It went quiet as I broke down my rifle. It took me exactly 45 seconds to get it broken down and ready to move. I was on my way down the stairs within a minute. As soon as I hit the ground floor, my bike was waiting on me. I’d pulled it inside the building to hide it from sight. “Clear,” I said as I pulled out of the building. I was one block over from the warehouse, so the street was quiet. I still didn’t waste any time getting out of there.

“3…2…1…” Andrei said. I felt the explosion when it happened. I expected it to knock out our earpieces, given that there were explosions throughout the city at the same time, so I wouldn’t know that everyone made it out until we were back at the penthouse. The plan was to regroup at the building, then we were going to grab Dr. Moretti in the wee morning hours, so he wouldn’t know what hit him.

This was the worst part of any plan. The waiting. The not knowing. I expected Ivan and Sephie to be waiting on me when I got to the building. Then we’d wait for the rest of the group to show up. I tried not to be nervous, but I always failed miserably.

I pulled into the parking garage. No bike. Shi t. Ivan and Sephie should be here. Where the f**k are they?

I only had to wait a few minutes and the rest of the group showed up. “We’ve got a problem. Ivan and Sephie aren’t here,” I said as they pulled up. Adrik went nuclear right away.

“They should be here already. Where the f**k are they? Did you see anything before you left?” he asked, His anger, much like my own, turned him into a beast. He wasn’t Adrik anymore. He was his anger personified. I knew his anger wasn’t directed at me, but he was still a sight to behold. The dealers were visibly apprehensive. They’d never seen this side of Adrik. He looked like he was ready to snap at any moment. Every muscle in his body was flexed, every vein engorged with blood. If I really was a vampire, I’m sure I’d be able to hear his heartbeat loud and clear. His eyes had an intensity to them when he was angry that made you feel a sort of primal fear. You felt like he was a predator and you were definitely the prey.

“I covered them until they got on the bike. I lost sight of them after that. The explosion knocked out the earpieces so I didn’t hear anything either,” I said.

Viktor pulled his phone from his pocket. “I gave Sephie a tracker just in case,” he said as he checked his phone. “I’ve got a location. She’s moving ”

Misha had gone to one of the SUVs to grab new earpieces for everyone. “What direction?” he asked as he handed us all new earpieces. It was easier than waiting for them, all to reset themselves. Faster, too. We didn’t have time to waste.

“They’re headed to the north end of the city,” Viktor said.

“That’s Sal’s area of the city,” Andrei said, a clear look of worry on his face.

“He’s a dead man.” Adrik said as he grabbed a helmet and climbed on a bike. We all followed quickly. Even the dealers jumped into two SUVs, ready to help us out once more. Looks like taking care of Salvadori was getting bumped up on the schedule.

Chapter Two Hundred Seventy-Four

Stephen

We followed Sephie's signal. As we got closer, it was obvious that she had stopped moving. It was going to take all of us to keep Adrik from rushing into whatever was waiting for us. It was highly likely that they were going to use Sephie to set a trap for

Adrik.

We got within half a block of Sephie's signal and Viktor stopped us. "She hasn't moved for a few minutes. I think it's best we see what we're walking into first. We don't know if Ivan is still with her or how many guys they have."

"You and Andrei go check it out. I won't be able to hold myself back if I go," Adrik said.

Viktor nodded and he left with Andrei on foot to get a better look at where Sephie was. They were only gone a few minutes. The looks on their faces when they returned made us all panic. Viktor held up the tracker he'd given Sephie, along with the helmets they were wearing when they left the warehouse."

"Hopefully this means Ivan is still with her, at the very least," I said.

We could all tell that Adrik was slowly losing control of his anger. I'd seen him when he'd lost control a few times. The carnage that he left in his wake was impressive. He wouldn't hesitate to burn this city to the ground if it meant finding her. Lord help the people of the city if something happened to Sephie. There would be no survivors.

Adrik looked toward Misha. "Anything?" he asked, almost desperately. Misha got that faraway look in his eye that meant he was running through scenarios in his head.

"They're still alive as far as I can tell, but that's all I've got right now," he said.

"F**K," Adrik said. "She could be anywhere."

"We'll find her. Ivan will protect her, as long as he's with her. They don't know who they're dealing with when it comes to both Ivan and Sephie. Ten bucks says they escape before we can find them," Viktor said, trying to put Adrik at ease.

"We're going after Dr. Moretti right now. I need to beat someone within an inch of their life right now," Adrik said, getting back on his bike. Might be a change of plans for the doctor, too. We had planned on holding him until the bosses were taken care of and then turning the doctor over to the police. They would get the credit for capturing him and he would have a very public trial for his crimes against the city. We might be improvising on that plan now.

It didn't take long to make it across town to the doctor's house. The house was quiet. He was being watched 24/7 to make sure he didn't try to escape. The guys watching him said he'd gotten home about an hour before we arrived and had been in the house since. There were a few lights on in the house. The rest of the block was quiet. We waited to see if we could see movement in the house. He walked by an open window eventually, giving us the confirmation we needed it was him.

Adrik didn't say a word, he just moved quickly toward the house. Even when he was so angry he couldn't see anything but red, he was still a skilled assassin. He moved silently and quickly to the house. He was inside in seconds, moving like a ghost through the house. The doctor didn't know what hit him. His face was unrecognizable by the time we got in the house. It took all four of us to pull Adrik off the doctor. We managed to push him to the next room while the other guys that were with us got the doctor secured and removed him from the house. They would take him back to the building and put him in a room.

Adrik started to calm down, but only slightly, after the doctor was removed from the house. We walked back outside, back to the bikes. He was slowly becoming distraught as his mind played out every scenario around Sephie being captured. We needed to find her quickly or there was going to be tremendous fallout when he fully unleashed his chaos.

I caught Misha on the way back to the bikes. I took my earpiece out and clicked it off, motioning for him to do the same. He did, but had a concerned look on his face. "I have an idea, but I need your help," I said.

"I'm listening," he said, puzzled.

"It involves the high strangeness we've all witnessed with Sephie and well, all of us. We have to convince Boss that he can find Sephie on his own. He can feel her. I know he can. We just have to convince him he can. I need your help to do that," I said.

Misha thought for a minute, then a small smile crept over his face. "Stephen, you might be a genius."

Sephie

"We'll do it. Ivan, get Sephie out of here. Stephen, cover Ivan and Sephie as far as you can. The rest of us are going around the warehouse. Andrei will detonate once we're clear," Adrik said.

I didn't even have time to object to leaving him before Ivan had grabbed my hand, pulling me away from Adrik. There was no time to say anything to him before we were gone, I knew I would see him in a few minutes, but there was a gnawing feeling in the pit of my stomach about leaving him. I didn't like it.

We were moving so quickly that I didn't have time to say anything to Ivan either. I just went with Ivan, knowing he would keep me safe until Adrik could make it back to the building. We ran to the bike that was waiting for us and were leaving in under two minutes.

It was quiet on the route we took. We were out of sight of Stephen now, so we were on our own until we made it back to the building. I was still nervous, even though I was trying not to be.

"At least you're not bleeding profusely this time," I said, as I held onto Ivan just a little tighter as we were speeding through the streets weaving our way back to the building.

He chuckled, patting my leg. He slowed to make a turn onto a new street and we were suddenly surrounded. There was an SUV in front of us, blocking the turn, and two more quickly blocked us from behind and the side. Ivan made a move to drive down the sidewalk to get away, but the vehicle in front of us moved at the same time, blocking our path. It gave them just enough time for two guys to jump out of the SUV behind us and catch up to us. One of them grabbed me from behind, ripping me off the bike.

"Ivan!" I screamed as they grabbed me. He stopped immediately and jumped off to try and get to me. I had screamed on purpose, to make the guy that grabbed me think I was helpless. I felt his grip on me relax slightly as he assumed he could easily manage me. I was still wearing my helmet, so I leaned forward as far as I could, then crashed my head into his as hard as I possibly could. He stumbled backward, his grip on me completely loose now. I got free, turned to face him, and promptly shot him in the face.

There were more guys on us. I turned to see Ivan fighting three guys. I pulled my helmet off to see better, but I couldn't get a clear shot of any of them without risking shooting Ivan. I did consider trying it, since I knew he wouldn't feel anything, but I decided against it. I ran toward him to help. Two more guys rushed me when I got closer to Ivan. They both slammed me into a parked car. One of them put a gun to my head, which made me freeze. The other guy grabbed my gun. The guy that had the gun to my head whistled loudly, which caused Ivan to look toward me. He stopped as soon as he saw they had a gun to my head. He'd still managed to kill two of the guys that were on him, though.

"Hands where I can see them or she dies," the guy with the gun said to Ivan. He put his hands up immediately. They searched him, taking his weapons from him. "Get in," he said, motioning to one of the SUVs. They picked me up off the car and searched me as well. They found the tracker in my pocket and took it. They threw me in the SUV with Ivan; they zip tied both of our hands in front. The guy that held a gun on me looked at me and said, "you try anything and he dies." He then looked at Ivan. "You try anything and she dies." They all got back in their vehicles and started driving. Once we were moving. Ivan reached over and pulled me closer to him. He looked over at me, saying quietly in Russian, "we're going to get out of this. Don't worry,

princess."

Chapter Two Hundred Seventy-Five

Sephie

I felt strangely calm when I looked at him. I could see the look of surprise on his face and raised an eyebrow at him. I was confused as to why he would be surprised.

“Your eyes are almost black, princess. Keep that. It’s going to prove useful,” he said, winking at me.

Game on, motherf**kers.

I held onto Ivan as best I could, with our hands zip tied, as the vehicle we were in sped through the city. While Ivan had been driving south, toward the penthouse, we were now driving north. I wasn’t sure who’s part of town we were headed to, but I was sure it wasn’t going to be good. The vehicle made a stop several blocks from where they had grabbed us. One guy got out and left our bike helmets on the ground. I saw him toss the tracker Viktor had given me before we left the building in between the helmets. We continued our way north.

Despite our situation, I was still able to remain calm. I wasn’t sure if it was Ivan’s doing. He looked almost happy about getting grabbed. I knew he would be able to withstand whatever they put him through. I also knew that Adrik would not stop until he found me and I knew without a shadow of a doubt that he would find me. I didn’t know how. I just knew he was coming for me, along with the other four guys. Whoever had made the dumb decision to grab me was going to regret that life choice.

We eventually pulled into a parking garage of an older building. It was non-descript. It looked like every other building in the city. The garage was mostly empty, which likely meant the building was mostly abandoned. This doesn’t bode well for us. It would take Adrik a year to search every abandoned building in the city to find us.

They pulled us from the vehicle, ushering us to the elevator. Well, at least that still works. We went up to the 5th floor. It looked like it was an office building in a previous life. They took us across the floor to a room on the opposite side of the floor as the elevator. I saw Ivan taking mental notes of our surroundings as we walked. He was silently calm beside me. He made sure to stay close enough to me that I could feel his presence as we were led through the maze of desks that had been left behind.

They opened the door to the room and I instantly recognized it. Shit. It was the same room, exactly, that I was in when I had the nightmare my first night at the house. It felt like a lifetime ago. I was afraid I knew what was going to happen. Ivan glanced at me, noticing a change in my expression, but he said nothing. I knew he would wait until we were alone to ask me anything.

The only difference between the room before us and the one in my dream was there were now two chairs, instead of just one. They put each of us in a chair and cut the zip ties off our hands, only to zip tie us to the chair instead. Ivan watched everything. like a hawk, I knew he was looking for weaknesses. If anyone could find a way out of this, it was him.

The men that had grabbed us walked out of the room, leaving us alone. Ivan scooted his chair closer to mine. “What is it about this room, princess? I saw the look on your face when we walked in,” he said quietly, in Russian.

“I’ve been here before,” I said. He raised an eyebrow, shocked. “No, not like that. I had a nightmare the first night I was at the house, after Anthony choked me at the restaurant. It started at my uncle’s house, then faded to this room. I was tied to a chair and everything. Anthony came in. Of course I said something smart to him and he punched me. That’s when he told me he was going to use me as bait. I screamed and woke up, so I don’t know anything past that.”

“Well, at least we know who grabbed us,” he said. “I should be able to grab a knife when they come back, if I can get them close enough to me. Princess, look at me.” I turned my head to look at him. “They’re going to use me to scare you. To intimidate you into doing whatever they want you to do. They’ll likely torture me to try and break you. I’ve been in this situation before. I’m going to have to pretend that I can feel what they’re doing. They can’t know that I don’t feel pain, so I have to put on a show. It’s just a show. Got it?” he said, winking at me.

“This is why you’re my protector, Super Squish,” I said.

“Just like you screamed when they grabbed you, we need them to continue thinking they have an advantage over us. They’ll get sloppy at some point. We just have to outlast them. I can handle whatever they’re going to do to me. I need you to do the same, princess,” he said.

I felt my anger getting stronger. I looked over at him again, only to see surprise in his eyes once again. I laughed. “How dark are they now?” I asked.

“You look scary, princess. Keep it up.”

They left us alone for what seemed like forever. Ivan and I talked quietly to pass the time. Ivan picked ridiculous subjects to help me stay calm. We still inevitably ended up talking about how long it would take the others to find us.

“I realize we have no whiteboard here and we really don’t even have a way to tell how much time is passing, since they took your watch. Dick move, by the way, but how long do you think it’s going to take them to find us?” I asked. We kept our conversations to Russian only, even though it didn’t really matter at this point.

Ivan chuckled. “I say no longer than a day and a half.”

I contemplated his answer. I would’ve liked a shorter prediction, but I decided to take the over instead of under. “I say three days.”

Ivan clicked his tongue at me. “Princess, you’re not being pessimistic on me now are you?”

“I like to call it being realistic. It’s a big city and they have no way to find us.”

“You underestimate your bond with your goddamn prince. He’ll find you.”

As I was about to answer, the door to the room opened. I kept my mouth shut, now feeling nervous to see who was going to walk through the door. I fully expected Anthony to walk through the door, just like he had in my dream. Two of the guys that had grabbed us walked in and closed the door behind them. Given that we’d killed three of their buddies, they didn’t seem to be terribly happy with us. They didn’t say a word, they simply leaned against a table across the room and watched us.

Ivan said, in English, “are you boys going to stare all night or are you going to tell us what you want with us?”

The two men looked at each other, then looked back at Ivan, but still didn’t say a word. They’d been speaking Italian when they grabbed us, so it made me wonder if their English wasn’t that great. I translated what Ivan had said to Italian. Both men were surprised to hear me speak Italian.

“Yeah, I know, right? It means I understood everything you assholes were saying when you grabbed us. I don’t forget easily. When we get out of here, and we will get out of here, I’m going to enjoy sending you to meet your dead friends,” I said. I could feel my anger rising as I thought about what they said about me when they grabbed me. They actually had a discussion about whether they could get away with having their way with me before they brought us to the building. They only decided against it because Ivan was with me and they’d have to explain killing him. They had orders to bring us both alive.

One of them, a clear smirk on his face, said, “strong words from someone who’s tied to a chair.”

“Ask your buddy how much stronger my actions are than my words, Oh, wait. You can’t. I shot him in his goddamn face,” I said. I had to admit, I was actually enjoying this little exchange. They had grossly underestimated me when they grabbed me.

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Chapter Two Hundred Seventy-Six

Sephie

“Princess, careful. I don’t know what you’re saying, but I know you’re verbally owning them right now,” Ivan said to me in Russian. He said it quietly, so the two guys barely heard him.

Ivan was right. I was supposed to be making them think they had the upper hand with me, so I tried to show restraint.

“You never answered his question. What do you want with us?” I asked in Italian.

“We’re just following orders. Our boss is very interested in you and the men you keep company with,” one of them said.

“Who’s your boss?” I asked.

“Patience, dear. You’ll find out soon enough.” With that, they both got up and walked out of the room, closing the door behind them.

Ivan looked at me, waiting for me to tell him what had just been said. Before I could tell him, he said, “your Italian is better when you’re angry.” His wide smile spread across his face.

I laughed. “You didn’t understand what they were talking about when they grabbed us. They were trying to decide if they had enough time to pull over and take turns raping me. They decided against it because they would’ve had to ki ll you and they couldn’t come up with a reason to cover. I told them when we get out of here, I would enjoy sending them to meet their dead friends.” I glanced at Ivan, his anger visible on his face where not two seconds ago, his smile had been. “I asked them again. what they wanted with us. They said they were following orders and whoever they’re working for is very interested in the men I keep company with. It’s gotta be Sal or Armando.”

“Agreed. It could be both of them, for all we know.”

“That wouldn’t surprise me either. They said we’ll find out soon enough,” I said.

Ivan sighed. “They really are using you as bait. I would rather get out of here before that happens, but I also want to see who is behind this. If we leave now, we won’t know for sure who ordered this.”

“Oh, I’m all for waiting for the big reveal. If it’s Armando, I want to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that he deserves to d ie.”

I heard Ivan laugh quietly again. “Misha was right, you know. You’re so much like us now that it’s scary.”

I laughed this time, too. “He told you about that, huh?”

“Yeah, except for Stephen and the really big stuff like my past, there aren’t many secrets among us. And now that Stephen told

us, there aren’t many secrets with him either.”

“That guy. I used to think he was a serial killer and I was still strangely fine with that possibility. Now that I know he’s just a vampire, it all makes sense,” I said, laughing.

“We all thought that and we were all hine with it. Have you heard about him when he gets pushed too far?” Ivan asked.

“Stephen? He can be pushed too far? Really?”

“He’s similar to your go ddamn prince. The bloodlust is almost as bad in Stephen. I’ve only seen it happen a couple of times, but

there was no stopping him when it happened. I’m counting on it happening when they find us. They could just send him and your go ddamn prince in here and nobody would walk out of here alive. Doesn’t matter how many people are in this building

with us.”

“I might enjoy seeing that,” I said.

We kept talking quietly for a while longer, just trying to pass the time. I needed to pee, after what I assumed to be a few hours of sitting in this chair. I groaned. “Shi t, I need to pee. Think they’ll let me use the bathroom?”

“If they do, use the opportunity to get a feel for where everything is. I know where the stairs are, where the elevator is. Look for things that can be used as weapons and distractions. Like fire extinguishers and paper towel dispensers in the bathroom, if they’re metal.”

“If they let me use the bathroom, then they’ll be more likely to let you use it too. Can you lift a knife off one of them if they let you out of the chair?”

“Possibly. You can too, princess. Use a distraction, like tripping and bumping into them to grab what you need.”

I chewed on my bottom lip, nervous about trying to lift something off of one of them, worried about what would happen to me or Ivan if they caught me.

It wasn’t very much longer and the same two men came back into the room. I told them that I needed to pee. They both walked to the chairs we were tied to. One of them pulled a gun and pointed it at Ivan. “You try anything and he dies,” he said, flatly. The other guy cut my restraints and pulled me out of the chair. He kept a tight hold of my arm the entire way to the bathroom. There was no way I was going to be able to grab anything off of him, so I looked around while we were walking. There was a fire extinguisher on the opposite side of the floor from the room we were being kept in. It was by the elevators.

Luckily, the guy didn’t follow me into the bathroom, so I had a chance to be alone for a minute. I took note of everything in the bathroom that we could possibly use to our advantage. I heard a beep in my ear. My earpiece. They missed it when they searched me. I pulled it out of my ear. I had no clue how it worked, but there was a blue light blinking on it. Normally, there was a blue light that remained on when they would hand it to me. It was never blinking. I looked it over, pressing the only button on it, just to see what would happen. It beeped quietly three times in a row, then went silent, but the blue light was still blinking. No idea what that means. I put it back in my ear, just in case.

The guy that escorted me to the bathroom stuck his head inside the door and yelled at me to hurry up. I quickly finished up and walked out of the bathroom. He grabbed my arm once more and practically drug me back to the room with Ivan. When we walked into the room, Ivan was bleeding from a cut above his eye.

“What the f**k? I didn’t do anything wrong. Why did you hurt him?” I asked, trying to appear as frightened as possible, rather than showing the extreme anger I was feeling.

“He has a smart mo uth,” the guy with the gun said. “Almost as smart as yours.” I glanced to Ivan as they shoved me back in the chair. He was totally fine. He didn’t look it, but I knew he wasn’t feeling like he just got hit with the bu tt of a gun.

They zip tied my wrists back to the chair once more. The guy with the gun put it back in its holster once I was secured to the chair again. He looked at me then punched Ivan once more before walking out of the room, once again leaving us alone.

“Are you going to tell me what your smart mo uth said to him?” I asked, trying not to smile.

“I asked him how good his English was. When he didn’t answer, I asked him if he wanted to d ie quickly or if he was okay with me dragging it out,” he said. “Then he hit me with the bu tt of his gun.”

“Rude. I knew their English was better than they were letting on,” I said. “I bet that was a test to see if I really could speak

Italian.”

“Which means it’s likely Sal that we’re waiting on. Armando knows you can understand Italian.”

“Is it wrong that I’m slightly disappointed it’s not Armando? I really want a definitive decision on that f**ker,” I said. “Maybe Sal just didn’t believe that I could understand Italian so he tested it just to be sure. It could still be both of them.”

We heard voices outside the door. More than just the two guys that had been watching us. “Looks like we might find out the answer sooner rather than later,” Ivan said.

Chapter Two Hundred Seventy-Seven

Sephie

The door opened once more. The two guys who grabbed us walked in first, followed by Salvadori, followed by Armando. Oh, he's dead. They glanced at Ivan, who had blood that was drying on his face, then looked to the two guys who had grabbed us. They just shrugged their shoulders like it wasn't their fault.

Sal walked toward me. The look on his face was difficult to read. He looked happy, but he also looked angry. "You, my dear. You can't keep yourself from killing my men. That's not very lady like of you," he said as he ran a finger down the side of my face and my neck. I felt nauseous at his touch. I could feel Ivan's anger, much the same way I could feel Adrik's, but it wasn't quite as strong of a feeling. But I didn't need to look at him to know he was not happy that Sal was touching me.

"Your men are anything but gentlemen toward me. Maybe if they weren't constantly trying to harm me, I would be nicer to them," I said, trying to move away from his hand as far as I could.

Sal laughed, turning to look at Armando. "You were right, Mando. She is a firecracker."

"What do you want with me?"

"Well, my dear, it started out innocently enough. You were going to be the bait to draw out Ghost so we could ki ll him," he said. I tensed at him mentioning Adrik. "But now that you've killed so many of my men, I can't let that go unpunished. There's the matter of my son, as well. You've made him look like a fo ol. You seem to be in my debt, you see," Sal said. His fingers were still running down my neck. He caught the zipper of my shirt, unzipping it as far as it would go, which thankfully was only halfway down. He stood and stared at my bra for a moment, like it was the first time he'd seen a woman's breasts.

"Is this your first time seeing bo obs?" I asked. I didn't expect him to slap me, but he did. Hard. My head jerked to the side with the impact of his hand. Ivan threatened him, but Sal ignored him.

"You do have a smart mo uth. You'll learn to keep it shu t," Sal said.

"I told your idi ot son the same thing. School really wasn't my thing. I'm probably not going to learn that anytime soon," I said, looking at Sal with every ounce of hatred I could muster. His fist made contact with my face once more. This time, it was exactly like it had been in my dream. He punched me so hard that my chair tipped over backwards. I heard Ivan yell at him and I could hear him struggling in his chair. The two guys that grabbed us came over and set me back upright. "You punch like a weak old man," I said as soon as I was upright once again. "I bet you can't even get it up. How many di ck pills do you have to take to even have s ex?" Ivan laughed loudly beside me, which caused Sal to focus his anger on Ivan instead of me. Sal punched Ivan, squarely across the jaw, but Ivan's massive frame barely budged. He stayed quiet for a moment, looking at Sal. He turned his gaze to me, saying, "you were right. He punches like a weak old man."

"That's enough!" Armando said sternly. He had been quiet since they walked in the room. He looked uncomfortable. Good. He should be uncomfortable. His time is coming. "You're not going to get anything for her if you wreck her face," Armando said.

So, Dario was right. Sal was planning on selling me to the highest bidder. My anger was a raging inferno inside, but that thought made me laugh. This du mb f**k. Armando walked to stand next to Sal. He hadn't looked me in the eyes since walking into the room, but he did once he stood next to Sal. The look of surprise on his face was evident. Clearly, my eyes were still dark. I held his gaze, letting even more of my anger come to the surface, secretly hoping that my eyes would go still darker. I said, in Italian, "You're both going to d ie. Slowly. Painfully." I maintained eye contact with Armando until he looked away. He looked more nervous than when he'd come into the room. Even Sal looked uncertain about what to say. They looked at each other and walked out of the room without another word.

Once they were gone, ivan asked in Russian, "how's your face, princess?"

"I mean, it's felt better, but I'm okay. Lucky that he really does punch like a weak girl."

Ivan laughed. "What did you say to them?"

"I told them they were both going to d ie slowly and painfully. I'm guessing by the look on Armando's face, my eyes are still dark?" I asked, looking at Ivan.

"Um, yeah. Every time you look at me, they get darker. They're going to be black by the time this is over with."

"Or I'm going to spontaneously combust. It could go either way, really," I said, laughing.

"Judging by that interaction, I would guess Sal is in charge and Armando is going along with him for whatever reason. Maybe Sal has something over him?"

"Yeah, but remember who Armando is sleeping with. I don't think he's as innocent as he's trying to get us to believe. He only came to my defense because Sal beating me further would've meant a lower price for me. I'm done with him. There's no getting out of this for him, as far as I'm concerned," I said.

"I agree. We might be able to play them off each other, though. If we can get them fighting each other, it might give us a chance to get out of here. You're doing great, princess. I'm proud of you," he said, winking at me.

"I would not be doing this well if you weren't here with me, Super Squish. You're my favorite. Don't tell the others."

Chapter Two Hundred Seventy-Eight

Adrik

I was pacing up and down the sidewalk opposite Dr. Moretti's house. I was so angry that I almost couldn't think. I needed Sephie to help keep me calm and she was missing. We had no idea where she and Ivan were or how to even begin looking for them.

"I have the info from when they left the warehouse to where they were grabbed and then where we found their helmets and the tracker. Let's retrace their movements. We're bound to find something," Viktor said.

That was a weak plan, but right now, it was the only plan we had. They could be anywhere in the city now. We didn't even know for sure if Ivan was still with Sephie. They would have to kill him to get him away from her, I knew that, but there was a very real possibility that he was already dead.

1 caught Stephen looking at Misha, then he looked at me. "Boss, you can find her. You don't need the tracker. The connection you two have, that's your tracker. I don't know how it works when you two feel each other, but you can find her. Misha can help," he said.

I stopped, thinking about what he'd just said. "It's never worked when we've been this far apart before. We've always been relatively close," I said.

"Maybe I can amplify it the same way Sephie did for me when we saw Trino in trouble," Misha said. "I don't have a clue how she did it, but I'm willing to try everything I can to see if it works."

"We should go to where they were grabbed. Misha might be able to see something there," Stephen said. I simply nodded once and headed to my bike.

It was still very early in the morning. Most of the city was asleep, which made it easier for us to move through town. We made, it to the corner where Sephie's tracker had stopped for a few minutes. As we got closer to the spot, we could see bodies. My heart immediately dropped into my stomach. Please don't let one of them be Ivan. Stephen pulled ahead and checked the bodies. He shook his head no and I exhaled, momentarily relieved.

Misha got off his bike and looked over the scene. Ivan's bike was still there, but it wasn't wrecked. There were tire marks on the street in front of the bike, as well as behind. They blocked them in. Misha walked to Ivan's bike, turning to look at the one dead body well behind the bike. He pointed to the body, saying, "he grabbed Sephie. She got loose and shot him." He looked back toward the bike. There were two more bodies closer to the bike. "Ivan," he said, pointing to the bodies.

He stared at the bike for long enough that I thought he'd lost whatever it was he was seeing. Just when I was about to say something, he turned to look at a car parked on the street. He bent down to look at the front fender of the car. It was slightly dented, like the car had hit something at some point. He put his hand on the car and inhaled sharply. We could tell by the look on his face that he was seeing something we couldn't see.

"She went to help Ivan and they rushed her, pushing her into the car. They held a gun to her head to stop Ivan. They took het tracker and all the weapons and put them in their vehicle." He pointed up the street. "They went that way," he said.

At least we knew that Ivan was with her, for now. I was now worried about her being hurt, though. "Is she hurt? Can you tell?" I asked Misha.

"I think she's okay. Or her adrenaline is masking it. She walked to the vehicle okay, even after they shoved her into the car really hard," he said.

"Let's go where we found the belmets. Maybe Misha can give us the direction they went after ditching the tracker," Stephen

said. We all climbed back on the bikes, following Viktor to where we found their helmets earlier.

It only took a few minutes to reach the spot where we found their helmets. Misha got off his bike again, surveying everything the same as he did before. He stood for a few moments, looking at everything. He finally looked to me, clearly frustrated. "I can't see anything this time. I know they went north when they left here, but that's all I can see this time. Sorry, Boss."

"North means Sal's area, which means it was likely Sal that grabbed them," Viktor said.

Stephen climbed off his bike. "Boss, come here. I have an idea," he said as he walked toward Misha. At this point, I was ready to try anything. Just because we'd narrowed down the area of the city they were headed to didn't make it any easier to find them. "So, when Sephie touched Misha, his visions amplified. What happens when you do it while you're thinking about trying to feel Sephie?"

It was worth a shot. I inhaled, extending my hand to Misha. It was easy to think about Sephie and finding her. I was already desperate to feel her in my arms again. I felt Misha squeeze my hand tighter. "They took them to an old building, but it's so dark that I can't see an address. Keep thinking about her," Misha said, then added, "they're in a room. It's an old office building. I can't see very much clearly, but they're both alive."

"So, the north side in an abandoned office building. That narrows it down," Andrei said, somewhat sarcastically, but with apparent frustration in his voice.

We stood in silence for a few minutes. Viktor looked at Misha, a look of hope on his face. "Misha, when they took the tracker from Sephie, did you see them take her earpiece?"

"No. Ivan's either. They still had them when they got in the vehicle," Misha said.

Viktor then looked to me. "The range on the earpieces aren't as strong as the tracker, but we might be able to pick them up if we can get close enough."

"How close do we need to be?" Andrei asked.

"Those things have about a two-mile radius," Viktor said.

"It's worth a shot," I said.

"I also suggest waiting until daylight. If they're holding them in an abandoned building, having people drive by at this time of the night is going to be obvious. They'll see us coming. For once, the darkness won't provide the cover we need. We should wait until daylight so there are other people out and about," Viktor said. "We divide that part of town up into a grid and work it until we get a signal. We can get the dealers to help on foot, too. They'll blend in easier."

"F**k! I know you're right, Viktor, but pausing the search does not make me happy," I said, trying to control my anger.

"You're not the only one, Boss. We all want to find her, but we need to be smart about it. We don't want them moving her. Or worse," Andrei said.

"We're gonna find her, Boss. Now that we know Ivan is with her, that helps. I don't feel like she's dead, either," Misha said. He paused to look at me, then added, "add that to the list of sentences I never thought I'd say in my life. Seriously, though, you would feel it if something happened to her. I know it."

"I don't think she's dead either. There's a pull in my chest that I feel anytime I'm away from her until I get back to her. It's still there and it's getting stronger," I said.

"We might be able to use titat to help find her," Stephen said. "How strong does it get?"

"I'm not sure. I haven't been this far away from her, ever. It gets stronger when she's hurt though. I told her it feels like my heart is urging me to destroy whatever caused her pain." I ran my hand through my hair. I was definitely not expecting to be having this conversation in the middle of the street at 3 am.

"She's told us about that before. She feels it, too, and we all feel it with her, just to a lesser extent than you," Andrei said.

"Let's head back to the penthouse. I think if you can focus on that pull, it'll help us know where we should start looking once. the sun comes up," Stephen said. I nodded once.

As we drove back to the penthouse, I caught myself thinking about how surprising it was that it was Stephen that had come up with this plan. I would not have bet on him to take charge of this situation before Sephie. Just like with Misha, she was slowly bringing out the absolute best in Stephen. He had talked more since she came into our lives than he had in the previous few years that he'd been working for me. We were all somewhat relieved and admittedly slightly disappointed to learn that he wasn't a serial killer.

Chapter Two Hundred Seventy-Nine

Adrik

Viktor stopped by the office and grabbed a map before meeting the rest of us in the penthouse. Andrei started making coffee for everyone. We were all quieter than usual, worried about finding her. I was having trouble controlling my thoughts. I kept thinking about them hurting her, which would cause my anger levels to rise even more. It was taking every bit of control I had to keep my anger in check, using the trick that Sephie had showed me.

Viktor put the map on the kitchen island, marking the spots where they were grabbed and where we found their helmets. Sal controlled the north side of town. It had been a booming area years ago, but had seen a decline in the past few years. There were plenty of abandoned buildings in his area, which would not make our search any easier.

As I looked at the map, feeling completely overwhelmed at where to start looking, Stephen said, “Boss, focus on that pull you feel. Close your eyes if you have to, but focus on the pull you feel toward her.”

My anger was at such a level that paying attention to anything else was proving to be difficult. The pull in my chest was a normal feeling when I was away from her. It had become so normal that I didn’t pay much attention to it when I was away from her. Stephen could tell from the look on my face that I was struggling.

“Think about her, then. Think about finding her, specifically. Think about how relieved you’re going to be to see her once again. Think about feeling her in your arms when you find her,” Stephen said.

His words were helping my anger subside enough that the pull in my chest grew stronger. My demeanor must’ve changed, because Stephen nodded to Misha, who grabbed my hand again. Misha’s eyes went wide as soon as he touched me.

“Keep thinking about her, Boss. Feel that pull in your chest. Focus on that,” Stephen said.

Misha said, “I know the area. I still can’t see the address on the building, but I know the area. They’re not that far from the docks.” He let go of my hand and pointed to an area on the map. “They’re somewhere in here.”

Viktor marked it on the map, taking a closer look at the area. “This makes it easier than having to search the entire north end of town, but there’s more abandoned buildings than not in this area.”

“How easy is it going to be for us to search the area without being seen?” Andrei asked.

“Not as easy as I was hoping. There won’t be many people in this area. We’re going to need Gus and his guys to help us search. They’ll be able to blend in with the few people that are going to be out and about better than we can,” Viktor said.

“What if we use a distraction? Drop another building in the area. It might make them nervous enough that they move them, then we can catch them as they come out,” Andrei said.

We all thought for a moment on Andrei’s idea. “I want to make sure we’re not dropping the building they’re in first, but I’ll level that end of town if it means getting her back,” I said.

Once the sun came up, Viktor called Chen “Any word on Sephie?” he asked as he picked up the phone.

“We’re narrowing down where we think they took her. We need your help. We have a way to search for them, but the part of town they’re in is mostly abandoned buildings. We’re going to stick out. We need you to get Gus and his guys to help us search,” Viktor said

“How many guys do you need?”

“As many as you can get,” Viktor said. “We’ll meet at the apartment building. Two hours.”

The parking lot of Sephie’s old apartment building was full when we showed up two hours later. Chen had gathered 20 willing to help us search.

“How did you get this many guys on such short notice?” I asked Chen.

guys

“They’re all grateful you stopped the brawn operation last night. They want to help,” he said. “Most of them are Trino’s guys. Apparently that guy will sing her praises to anyone who will listen.” He gave me a tight smile. “But we all want to find her and stop the other bosses, especially Sal.”

Viktor took over and laid out the plan for the search. The earpieces would connect to each other automatically when you were within range. All the guys had to do was be close enough to Sephic and Ivan’s earpieces and their earpiece would beep to connect. No connection, no beep. It was as simple as that. The city was already a grid, so Viktor just assigned groups of guys to each section of the grid. All they had to do was walk down the street, waiting for the beep in their ear that told them which building Sephie was in. Without getting caught, of course.

“Everybody’s packing, right?” Gus asked when we were ready to leave. Everyone nodded their heads yes. “If anyone stops you, you’re there to make a deal. Find a homeless person if you have to. Whatever you need to do to make it believable, but try to stay under the radar as much as possible.”

While they were searching, we couldn’t do anything but wait. I paced. My adrenaline was still going full force. There was no chance on me being able to sleep until we found Sephie and Ivan.

At one point, Andrei got up and looked through the cabinets in the kitchen. We had left all her dishes and kitchen appliances when we moved her stuff from her apartment. He found her coffee maker, then found some coffee still in the pantry. He sniffed it, then shrugged his shoulders and set about making coffee.

“This is probably going to su ck, but I need something and I’m sure you all do too,” he said as he poured himself a cup of coffee. We watched as he took the first sip. “I’ve definitely had worse.”

Chapter Two Hundred Eighty

Adrik

Everyone else grabbed a cup after Andrei was the guinea pig. I really didn't need the caffeine boost, but I wasn't going to turn it down either. It was another two hours before guys started returning to the apartment. The first ones back had no luck. Viktor marked off their areas on the map, further narrowing down where they were holding them.

Gus returned with Chen and Oscar. "We got them," he said walking to the map, showing Viktor where they had picked up the signal from Sephie and Ivan's earpieces.

Chen looked at me, saying, "I heard them, sir. They were speaking Russian, so I don't know what they were talking about, but I heard both of them when the earpiece connected. I talked to Sephie very briefly. I wasn't sure if she could speak English where they were, so I just asked her to clear her throat if they were okay. She did. I told her you'd be there soon to get her."

The flood of relief that washed over me almost made me stumble to the ground. Chen grabbed my arm to help keep me steady. He looked sympathetic. "I understand, sir," he said quietly.

"We have it narrowed down to two blocks and those two blocks don't have quite as many abandoned buildings as the rest of the area," Viktor said. "Andrei's idea might work."

"Is his idea to blow another building as a distraction, because that's the kind of idea I fully support," Oscar said. Andrei just nodded his head, a small smile on his face. Oscar clapped his hands once, rubbing his palms together. "Building demolition is. my love language. When can we get started?"

"We need to make sure the building we choose isn't where they're keeping them, first," Viktor said, somewhat sternly.

"Of course, of course. Do you know how quickly I'd be dead if I harmed a hair on that woman's head? I'm not that dumb. What do you guys need us to do?" Oscar said.

"Searching the buildings on those blocks will be a little easier, since it's more populated, but it still won't be easy," Gus said. He

looked to DJ, then asked, "D], I know you know people in this part of town. Can you find out if anyone has seen anything suspicious on these two blocks? Somebody might've seen them bringing Sephie and Ivan to the building. If it's Sal that took them, they might've seen him showing up to the building."

We heard Stephen's phone beep. He took it out, reading the text message. His eyes went wide, then he walked to the map. He pointed to a building. "They're here," he said.

"How do you know?" I asked urgently, walking to look at the map.

"It was Keith. He said Armando has been acting weird. He left the house really early this morning, wouldn't tell Keith where they were going, just gave him an address. He made Keith and Chris wait in the vehicle while he went in the building. Keith said he has a bad feeling about whatever Armando was doing," Stephen said. "And for the record, Keith and Chris don't know about Sephie being taken."

The building he took Armando to was in between two occupied buildings. There was, however, another abandoned building at the end of the block. Andrei's plan could work.

"Tell Keith to keep us informed of Armando's movements to that building. Don't tell him why. We still don't know if Armando is on to Keith and is feeding him information He might still be trying to play both sides," | said.

Stephen texted Keith, then got an immediate reply. "He said Armando is scheduled to go back to the building tomorrow morning again, but again won't tell Keith and Chris why."

I looked to Andrei. "How quickly can we make this happen? If we can catch Armando at the building, we can take care of him right then."

"I just need a few hours and Oscar's help setting everything up." Andrei said.

"It'll be ready by tonight," Oscar said.

"I don't think it's just Armando that set this up either. I have a feeling Sal is behind this too," Viktor said. "Maybe we can catch both of them at the building."

"Agreed. I need to let Trino know we have a good shot of taking Sal out, which means he should take care of Anthony and Lorenzo at the same time," I said. "Gus, Oscar, does Trino know Sephie was taken?"

"Si, Jefe. We called him to let him know the warehouses were taken care of. We told him they grabbed her. He said to tell you he'd do whatever you needed," Gus said.

I nodded, taking my phone from my pocket. I walked to the bedroom to have a private conversation with Trino. Now that we had confirmation that Sephie was alive, I was quickly becoming overcome with emotion. My anger had receded to a manageable level, but I was now feeling every single other emotion all at once. I didn't trust myself completely to keep it together right

now.

"Jefe, tell me you found her," Trino said when he picked up the phone.

"We have her location, but it's going to take a little longer to get her out. We know for sure Armando is behind it, but they're in Sal's part of town, so it's likely he's behind it as well."

"What do you need? I hate to ask this question, but are you sure she's still alive?"

"She is. We had the dealers that helped us with the warehouses search that part of the city. The guys that grabbed her and Ivan didn't get their earpieces. The dealer that Sephie has known for years, Chen, is the one who found her. He heard her and Ivan talking. They're okay. He told her I was coming to get her." My voice cracked when I said I was coming to get her. I was fighting

back tears.

Trino let out a long exhale. "Jefe, this is good news. What's the plan?"

"We have word that Armando is scheduled to go back to the building tomorrow morning. We're going to drop a nearby building to create a little chaos, hoping to flush them out. My hope is we'll catch Armando and Sal at the building. They won't make it out," I said, my anger level now rising once more.

"I'll take care of Anthony and Lorenzo at the same time. I have them locked up for safe keeping. After the attempt on me by the Mexicans, I'm not f**king around. I grabbed them right away. They've been waiting for their sentencing ever since," he said.

"Sounds good, Trino. Even if we can only get Armando tomorrow morning, Sal will panic when he gets word that you've taken care of Anthony and Lorenzo. He'll be easier to take out then if he's not at the building in the morning."

"Let the dominoes fall, Jefe."

Chapter Two Hundred Eighty-One

Sephie

Ivan and I were left alone after Sal and Armando left the room. We had no way to know how long we'd been in there, as there were no windows in the room. It must be daylight outside by now. I had a dull headache starting from headbutting the guy that grabbed me off the bike and Sal's weak punch to my face. Ivan, however, looked much worse than I did with the dried blood down one side of his face.

"How's your head, Super Squish?" I asked in Russian. "Do you ever get headaches?"

He chuckled softly. "Nope. Well, let me rephrase that. I might get them, but I don't know it when I do."

I sighed. "That's so useful."

"Do you have a headache coming on, princess?"

I nodded my head. "It's not bad. I think it's more from when they grabbed us than Sal's weak sauce punch. They slammed me into the car pretty hard," I said. "I'm starting to feel it."

"Starting to feel what? Should I be worried?"

"No, I think it's okay. Just sore. I'm probably turning pretty colors. I like to live life in technicolor."

Ivan just laughed, shaking his head at me. "If I haven't told you this lately, your sense of humor makes life so much better." I smiled at him. Just as I turned my head, I heard a beep in my ear. I looked at Ivan, asking. "is your earpiece still working?" He nodded his head. "Did you just hear yours beep? And follow-up question, why would they beep like that?" I asked.

"Mine beeped. They do that when they connect. It means another earpiece just connected to ours," he said.

"Sephie? If you can hear me, it's Chen. Don't say anything, just clear your throat if you're okay," Chen said in my ear. I cleared my throat and heard him exhale. "Good. We're looking for you. Ghost is coming for you soon. We'll be back," he said. We could hear Chen talking to Gus and Oscar as they walked away and then the earpieces beeped once more, indicating they'd lost the signal.

"So, now the question is how long has it been? A day and a half? Or three days? This is important information," I said.

"We do have the integrity of the data to consider," Ivan said.

It felt like days before someone came back into the room. Ivan and I had been quietly talking almost the entire time, mostly to keep each other awake and calm. The two guys that had grabbed us walked back in the room. They walked straight to me, cutting the restraints off my wrists, and pulled me up roughly. I felt Ivan's anger go through the roof when they pulled me to a standing position.

"What are you doing? Where are you taking her?" Ivan asked. I could hear the anger in his voice. Everyone could hear the anger in his voice. The guy that had hit Ivan before punched him once more, only this time he was wearing brass knuckles. The damage was immediately visible on Ivan's face.

"What the f**k?" I yelled, trying to get free from the guy holding me. I managed to get one arm free and punched him in his nose. He stumbled backward, holding his nose. The guy that had gone after Ivan went to punch me, but Ivan surprised him by standing up, still attached to the chair, and using his body to slam the guy into the ground. The guy I had punched had recovered and had pulled his gun. Once again, he pointed it straight at my head, whistling loudly at Ivan. "If you don't sit back down, she dies," he said, coldly. He looked at his buddy, who got up from the floor and grabbed my arms. He pulled them both behind my back, putting another zip tie tightly around my wrists. He pushed me toward the door, then turned to look at Ivan. "I'll be back for you," he said. His voice had a threatening tone to it. I don't like this.

They pushed me out the door, down a short hallway to another room. Armando was waiting for me when we walked in. This isn't good. Armando looked pi ssed when he saw the blood on the one guy I'd punched. "Are you even capable of not hurting people?" he asked me..

"You seem to think that I'm the one that starts it. Tell your guys not to throw the first punch and I won't break their nose," I said.

Armando groaned, but nodded to the two men and pointed to one wall of the room. It was at that moment that I saw the ankle shackles connected to a chain that was bolted to the floor. I definitely do not like this. The two guys walked me quickly toward the shackles, shoving me into the wall. One guy kept me pressed against the wall while the other one attached the shackles. Once they were attached, they let go of me and left the room. I knew they were going back for Ivan. My heart sank thinking about what they were going to do to him.

I turned toward Armando, to see him holding a knife. He was looking at the knife, not at me. Turning it over in his hands, like he was seriously contemplating what to do next. Finally, his gaze lifted and he looked at me. "You're going to solve a lot of my problems," he said as he walked to me. He grabbed my shirt, despite my best efforts to move away from him. My hands were still tied behind my back and now my legs were chained. I didn't have many options. He pulled my shirt away from my body and used the knife to cut it off of me. He then did the same to my pants, leaving me in my bra and panties.

"Do you know what happens when a girl is sold?" he asked as he was cutting my clothes off. He didn't wait for me to answer. "We take pictures of them so the bidding can start. Your bidding is about to start," he said as he stepped back to look at me. He was visibly angry when he looked me up and down. "They were told not to harm you when they grabbed you," he said.

I looked down at my stomach, which was a really pretty shade of blue, with a hint of deep purple from where they'd shoved me against the parked car. "Oh no. Is that going to cut into your profits?" I asked as sarcastically as possible. He didn't answer me. but he did glare at me. I laughed. "If you think this is bad, wait until you turn me around. Spoiler alert: your problems are not going to be solved today," I said.

Curiosity got the best of him and he turned me around, finally seeing my scars. His grip on my arm tightened as the realization that I wouldn't fetch top dollar set in.

"You mean to tell me that damaged goods won't fetch top dollar? I'm shocked, Armando. SHOCKED," I said, still trying to provoke him to anger. I couldn't do anything to defend myself, but I was hoping for a miracle here and my anger had completely taken over. "Sal isn't going to be too happy with you when he finds out. You might've been able to sell me with just a front picture, but now all the angles are just totally f**ked up so I'm worthless. What's he going to do to you when he finds out you f**ked this up? What's he going to think when I tell him you're the one that gave me these bruises?" I saw the flash of uncertainty across his face before it quickly changed to anger. He stood for a moment contemplating what to do next.

◆

Chapter Two Hundred Eighty-Two

Sephie

I could hear them beating Ivan in the other room in my earpiece. He was provoking them as well. I trusted him to have a good reason for doing so, but it was looking more and more like we really were at the disadvantage here. Then, I heard it. My earpiece beeped. They’re close.

Armando had been contemplating his next move. He clearly decided that violence was the answer. He walked to me, angrier than I thought was humanly possible for him. “Do you know how long I’ve waited to do this?” he said as he punched me in the stomach. “Women are meant to be seen, not heard, but you can’t keep your f**king mouth shut. EVER.” His voice was just below a scream when he punched me a second time. I couldn’t do anything but take it, since I couldn’t even move my arms to protect myself.

“So, I’m guessing no pictures then?” I asked, just to pi ss him off more. Armando was stronger than Salvadori, but I’d definitely endured much worse. I could take this. Armando backhanded me, forcing me to take a step to the side to keep from falling down.

“My first wife didn’t know when to shut up either. Do you know what happened to her?” he asked as he punched me in the stomach another time. “I beat her to death when she wouldn’t shut up.”

“Did you get her h ooked on coke like you did Giana?” I asked. He paused for a moment. He didn’t know we knew about Giana’s little habit. “You know cocaine is a stimulant, you dumb motherf**ker. If you want them to be quieter, you should’ve gone with heroin. Or got them h ooked on another opioid.” I had him confused for a second. Clearly, he didn’t know the differente. “Seriously? This is news to you? How have you lasted this long in the business? You’re too f**king st upid to be a criminal mastermind. Who’s pulling your strings, puppet?”

Okay, I might’ve gone a little overboard there, judging by his reaction. I also knew that whoever was connected to my earpiece would be able to hear this, so I was trying to get as much information out of him as I could. Armando had lost complete control and was just beating me as severely as he could manage. He finally hit me so hard that I fell to the floor. That opened the door for him to kick me. I tried to curl up as tight as I could, but it wasn’t easy with my hands behind my back and my ankles chained to the floor. I felt my left shoulder dislocate after one of his kicks and I screamed. I had been able to stay silent, as I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction, but I couldn’t hold it in when my shoulder came out of its socket. Armando delivered a second kick to the same arm and I felt my bone break.

He had taken a step back from me when we both heard an explosion. It rocked the building. He cursed under his breath. I just laughed at him. “You’re a dead man,” I said, coughing up blood. I was still on the floor, now trying not to move or think about the severe pain in my arm.

“Sephie?? Can you hear me?” I heard Adrik’s voice in my ear. I just cleared my throat, hoping he understood. “I’m coming.” he

said.

“Fifth floor,” I said in Russian. Armando heard me and turned to me once more, delivering yet another kick to my torso. We could clearly hear gunshots now. The two guys that had been beating Ivan in the next room now came to the room where Armando was beating me.

“A building at the end of the block just exploded. The guys downstairs went to check it out. They found us,” one of the guys

said.

“Are you excited?” I asked, trying to sit up just a little. I was starting to have trouble breathing. I think he broke my ribs. They looked down at me, confused. “Excited to see your buddies we killed? Because you’re about to see them again.”

“If you can answer, how many are on the floor with you?” Stephen asked in my ear. Since Ivan was alone now, he said,

“Armando is with Sephie and the two guys that were with me are likely there now too. I haven’t seen anyone else, but we’ve been kept in a room the whole time. Princess, cough once if that’s all you’ve seen.” I coughed once. “Got it, Seph. We’re coming. Stephen said.

Ivan said, “across the floor from the elevators are offices. I don’t know where they took Sephie, but there’s a short hallway to the side of the front offices. I’m guessing that’s where she is.” I coughed once more.

“Thanks, Seph.”

While Stephen and Ivan had been talking, Armando was trying to formulate a plan with the two guys. He pulled his phone out to make a call. Whoever he called didn’t pick up, which forced him to slam his phone down to the floor,

“I would suggest running now if you’re going to do it. They’re coming for you. Run to the roof and jump. Otherwise, you’re going to have a long, slow, painful death,” I said. “Especially you, Armando. Once Ghost sees me like this, you’re going to know pain like you’ve never known it before.” I heard all the guys cursing quietly in my earpiece. I said, in Russian, “his bu tthole just clenched a little.” I couldn’t keep from laughing a little, but it made my ribs hurt to do so, so I ended up cursing loudly.

“What are we going to do with her and the guy in the other room?” one of the guys asked.

“Kill him. Bring her with us,” Armando said. One guy came to take the shackles off my ankles, while the other left the room quickly to take care of Ivan. As soon as my legs were free, I kicked the guy in the face as hard as I could. He went tumbling backward. “Oh, for f**k’s sake,” Armando said as he walked toward me to grab me. He grabbed the arm that he’d broken to pull me up, causing me to scream. He slapped me and told me to shut up. My arms were still tied behind my back, so once again, I was forced to just take it.

We heard one gunshot from the other room. My heart dropped. “Ivan!” I yelled. Armando slapped me again, yelling, “I told you to shut up!”

I heard Ivan in my earpiece. “Princess, you know I wouldn’t leave you alone.”

“We’re coming in now,” Stephen said.

“Move to the left when you come through the door. Stay along that wall. They won’t be able to see you. You’ll come to the room where I am. Move quickly. Armando will be expecting his guy back,” Ivan said.

I looked at Armando. “You know, I said months ago that you had a savior complex. You like to pick damaged people because you think you can save them. I was only partly wrong. You pick damaged people because they’re easier for you to control. You don’t have a savior complex; you have a superiority complex. I just haven’t figured out if your bumbling idiot persona is an act or if you’re actually this st upid. Not gonna lie, I’m leaning hard toward you’re just this st upid.” I was trying to keep him focused on me to make it easier for the guys to surprise him. I could feel Adrik’s anger now that he was closer, but I was in so much pain that it was difficult for me to feel anything other than that. I heard Ivan laugh in my earpiece. “Which brings up my earlier question of who is pulling your strings? Is it Giana’s father? Ricardo? Both?” I asked. Armando had been looking toward the door while I talked to him, but he spun around to look at me when I mentioned Ricardo’s name. Bingo.

Chapter Two Hundred Eighty-Three

Sephie

He walked toward me again and I braced myself for another blow. “I’m going to tape your f**king mouth shut,” he said. If I thought I overdid it before, I was mistaken. The look on Armando’s face when he walked back to me actually made me fear for my life this time. He was so angry that I’d figured out who was controlling him that he might actually kill me this time. I saw movement over his shoulder and the other guy in the room dropped to the ground. I could barely hear the gun with the silencer attached. Armando turned when he heard the guy hit the floor, Adrik and Stephen were standing in front of him.

“Boss, I’m glad you’re here. Sal had them kidnapped. I’ve been trying to get her out of here,” Armando said, switching flawlessly back to the persona that he was a friend to Adrik. He said it so smoothly, that it was almost believable. It might’ve been if they hadn’t heard him beating me earlier through my earpiece. Ivan walked into the room behind Adrik and Stephen. He pulled his earpiece from his ear and held it up for Armando to see. I couldn’t see Armando’s face, but I’m sure he knew he’d f**ked up.

“Oh, by the way, she has one too,” Ivan said.

“We heard everything.” Adrik said. He took his jacket off, never taking his eyes off Armando. He walked slowly to me, taking a knife from one of his pants pockets and cutting the zip tie off my wrists. I tried to hold in the scream when my arm fell limp to my side. I saw Adrik flinch, but he stayed quiet. Even through my pain, I could feel his anger. It was to a level I’d never seen before, but he looked like he was in complete control. He wrapped his jacket around me, then put his fingers under my chin. “Can you give me five minutes, my love?” he asked as he pressed his lips to mine gently. I smiled at him. “Take as long as you need.” I said. He kissed me tenderly once more, then turned back to Armando.

“Ivan, stay with her,” he said in Russian. “Stephen, with me.” He grabbed Armando’s arm, twisting it behind his back painfully as he walked to the other side of the room, farther away from me and Ivan.

I looked at Ivan as he stood next to me. He looked like Hell. “You look terrible, Super Squish,” I said.

“You do too,” he said. He might’ve winked at me, but one of his eyes was so puffy, I wasn’t sure he could even see out of it.

Ivan did his best to keep me distracted while Adrik beat the ever-loving shi t out of Armando on the other side of the room. He noticed me holding my arm and lifted Adrik’s jacket to look closer at it. “He dislocated your shoulder, didn’t he?” I nodded my head.

“I think he broke my arm, too. I heard it snap,” I said, coughing. My ribs were really starting to hurt and I ended up coughing up more blood.

“Did he break your ribs too?” Ivan asked.

“I think so.” The more I talked, the harder it was to breath. Ivan heard me wheezing.

“Guys, we gotta get her to the hospital. I think her lung might be punctured,” Ivan said. He looked to Adrik, who was still on Armando “Andrei, Misha, Viktor…”

Before he could finish, I put my hand on his arm. “I can stop him,” I said I walked toward Stephen, who looked unsure Adrik had Armando un the ground, straddling him, just letting his fists fly in Armando’s face. If he wasn’t dead, he was definitely unconscious, and definitely was wishing he’d taken my earlier advice. I walked closer and put my hand on his back “Adrik I need you,” I said quietly

His fist stopped muda. He immediately turned to me, jumping to his teet Iuniled at him, but I was struggling to breathe and just walking the short distance made the start taki

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ch made it even harder to

Stephan adó bạn bull, lola

He leaned down and

“What…about…Armando…” I said, in between breaths.

“I’ll send someone up to get him and take him back to the building.” Viktor said in my earpiece. I heard the elevator doors ding Viktor, Andrei, and Misha were in the elevator.

“You guys…are a…sight…for…sore…eyes…” I said, trying to smile at them.

“Don’t talk, princess. We’ll catch up later. If your lung is punctured, you need to breathe as quietly as possible. Talking will make it worse,” Ivan said. He noticed my dislocated and broken arm dangling at my side and picked it up gently. He placed it in my lap. Adrik glanced at Ivan, who said, “it’s dislocated. She thinks it’s broken too.” Adrik just held me tighter in his arms.

Viktor had called ahead to the hospital. Thankfully, Dr. Williams was there and was aware that his two least favorite patients. were on their way. I laughed to myself thinking about the panic attack he was likely having knowing me and Ivan were coming. in.

I was in the backseat with Adrik, still in his arms. I looked up at him, worried about Ivan having to go to the hospital. “Ivan…” I whispered. He looked down at me, searching my eyes. A small smile crept over his face.

“Ivan will be fine. We need to get you taken care of first,” he said. I was suddenly very tired. I just nodded and rested my head on his shoulder. I was only vaguely aware when we got to the hospital. I could feel the darkness trying to take over. I was too tired to fight it. I felt them lift me out of the SUV and felt them place me on a bed. I felt Adrik’s hand in mine once they put me on the bed, but that’s when everything went completely dark.

Chapter Two Hundred Eighty-Four

Adrik

“What the f**k happened?” Dr. Williams asked as we pulled Sephie from the backseat of the SUV. He immediately started to look her over as we transferred her to the hospital bed.

“She and Ivan were kidnapped,” Misha said.

Ivan had walked up. “Her left shoulder is dislocated and that arm is likely broken too. She has broken ribs on that side and I’m almost positive she has a punctured lung. I’m sure there’s more, but that’s all I know for sure,” he said.

Dr. Williams nodded as we walked quickly down the hallway. He looked to Ivan, “and what about you? You also look like holy hell, but I’m not gonna lie, I’m terrified to look at you without her.”

“I can manage until she’s fine, doc,” Ivan said.

“We need to get her x-rayed to find out what we’re dealing with. I can hear her wheezing. She’s having trouble breathing. I know she reacts differently to anesthesia. Anything else I should know about?” Dr. Williams asked Ivan.

“Yeah, she doesn’t go anywhere without him,” he said pointing to me. “He is to her what she is to me. Keep him with her.”

“Noted.”

We walked onto an elevator while the guys stayed behind. Dr. Williams looked at me, then looked at my hands. “I’m hoping the guys that did this to her are in much worse shape than she is?” he asked.

“I’m just getting started,” I said.

“Good. What about the brawn situation? 1 heard about the explosions throughout the city. I’m hoping it had to do with taking care of that?” he asked.

“Taken care of. They grabbed her when Ivan was getting her to safety before we blew the warehouses,” I said.

“That’s a small relief,” he said as we exited the elevator. The nurses gave me funny looks as we walked into the x-ray room. “Make a note in her chart that this man stays with her, no matter what. There’s also five more downstairs that are to stay with her overnight. I don’t want any problems from any of the nurses.” The nurses looked puzzled, but didn’t argue.

Dr. Williams liked to talk while he worked. “What about Ivan? He doesn’t look so good. I’m not sure I believe him that he can. last until she gets well enough to work her magic on him. Do you have any other way for me to look at him without him killing me?”

I felt Sephie squeeze my hand faintly. When she did, the memory of Misha recording her playing the piano came into my head. I knew Sephie put it there. Even unconscious, she was still trying to help Ivan. “I have one idea that might work. He’s generally okay with minor stuff. If it’s something that would require anesthesia on a normal person, that’s where the real problem is. She’s the only one that’s ever been able to calm him like she does.”

I’ve never seen anything like it in my life. What’s your idea, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“She plays piano. She’s incredibly talented. Ivan gets stuck in his memories when he has to go to the hospital. He’ll wake up fighting like he did with you regularly. It’s a waking nightmare for him. In his mind, he’s back in his past, lighting for his life. In reality, he’s fighting us and we’re just trying to keep him from hurting himself or someone else. She can break him out of it, but

it means she can’t sleep while he sleeps. One of the guys recorded her playing the piano and that’s enough to keep him from getting sucked back into his nightmare. He knows she’s close by as long as he can hear her playing,” I said.

Dr. Williams had continued to take x-rays of Sephie’s entire body while I was talking. He stopped briefly to look at me. “That’s incredible.” He motioned toward Sephie. “I need to turn her onto her side,” he said, indicating for me to help him. Her body was covered in bruises already. When he saw her back, he gasped. “Holy shi t,” he said, looking to me again.

“Her uncle,” I said.

“F**ck,” he half-whispered as he continued taking x-rays.

Once he was done, he let me know what needed to happen next. “Her left shoulder is definitely completely dislocated. Her humerus is also fractured. She has five broken ribs and one of them has punctured her left lung. It’s difficult to tell from the x- ray, but she does have some blood in her lung and air is escaping into her thoracic cavity. Fortunately, her right lung looks fine.. Unfortunately, she’s going to need to stay in the hospital for a few days to make sure her lung doesn’t collapse. She’ll need a chest tube to help give the air a place to go, so her lungs can re-expand, and oxygen to help her breathe easier. She’s going to be in a lot of pain for a day or two,” he said..

“Pain meds knock her completely out and make it so she can’t eat for days at a time,” I said. “The last time she got seriously hurt, she took ibuprofen. When she got those scars on her back, she said she just took ibuprofen then too.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. We couldn’t believe it either, but apparently that shi t works for her,” I said, smiling at her. I still had a hold of her hand, not wanting to be apart from her.

We left the x-ray room and went to a surgery room so they could fix her arm. “We’re going to need to sedate her to fix her shoulder. That’s going to be painful if she's awake. I’ll let the anesthesiologist know about her reaction to normal pain meds. Redheads really do react differently to drugs than everyone else. That’s a real thing,” he said.

It took them a while to put her shoulder back and set her arm. She would have to wear a cast for a few weeks while her bone

healed. They put a chest tube in, which made her breathing quieter. She’d been on oxygen since we got to the hospital, but 1 could still hear her wheezing. Once the chest tube was in, she started to breathe quietly again. My own anxiety started to calm

down once she started to breathe quieter, too.

We went to a room once they were done. “I’ve sent a nurse down to get the other guys. I’d like to take a look at Ivan, if that’s possible. He looked rough before,” Dr. Williams said.

Once the guys walked into the room, they all looked exceptionally worried. I said, in Russian, “she’s okay. She’s going to have to stay here a few days, but she’s okay.” I looked to Misha, then to Ivan. “Misha, do you have the recordings of her playing on your phone still? The doctor wants to look at Ivan, but Sephie won’t be awake for a while. They had to sedate her to fix her shoulder so it might be a couple days before she wakes up. You should get looked at before that, Ivan,” I said.

“Yeah, Boss, I have them. Do you think that’ll work?” Misha asked Ivan.

“It’s worth a shot, I guess, but it’s probably best if you guys are there, just in case,” Ivan said. He was visibly nervous.

“I’m not leaving her. Do you four think you can handir him if it gets bad?” I asked

“We make it work,” Viktor said “You don’t need to lose her

I looked at the doctor. “han

po with you, but Itay is going as well, but in case they need to hold thn dow recording of her playing a hopefully that will help keep has caly enough Let’s hope you donnel to do anything

invasive on him,” I said, in English.

“You ain’t never lied. Follow me, gentlemen,” he said, walking out of the room leaving me alone with Sephie.

I leaned over her, kissing her forehead. “I’m so sorry, solnishko. Once again, you were never meant to get hurt. I’m so proud of you, though. I heard you with Armando. You got the information we needed out of him. You continuously surprise me with your intelligence. It’s more than that, though. You’re street smart as well. This business. It takes a certain level of cu nning. It takes most people a lifetime to figure it out and you just come by it naturally. You’re just amazing, Persephone. You make me want to work harder every single day to make sure I’m worthy of your love.” I grabbed her hand as I sat next to the bed to watch over her. I felt the faintest squeeze on my fingers. I picked her hand up, kissing the back of it. “Sleep, love. I’ll be right here the whole time.”

Chapter Two Hundred Eighty-Five

Adrik

It took a little over an hour before Ivan and the other guys came back to Sephie's room. He had a few sets of stitches in various places, but nothing major. I raised an eyebrow, curious how it went. Misha looked proud of himself. "The recording was enough that the doctor could check him over thoroughly. He didn't break anything. Just some stitches," he said.

They had put Sephie in a double room, with strict orders that no one else was to be placed in that room. The doctor was trying to give us an extra bed, since he knew we were all going to stay with her. I appreciated it. Ivan stretched out on the other bed. He looked exhausted. We all looked exhausted. We were quiet for a few minutes, then curiosity got the better of us.

"We know Armando was a part of it, but did you find out about anyone else?" Viktor asked.

"Sal was there the first night. Or first morning. To be honest, I have no idea what day it is. They took my watch, so time was meaningless while we were in that room. How long did it take you guys to find us?" Ivan asked. He had a bit of a grin on his face when he asked, like there was a joke we weren't privy to that he was thinking about.

"From the time they grabbed you until the time we got to you, it was right around 30 hours," Viktor said.

Ivan chuckled. "She's gonna be so mad and so impressed at the same time." We all looked to him for further explanation. "That was one of her first questions. How long it would take you guys to find us. I said no longer than a day and half. She said three days. She was worried when they found her tracker and pitched it. She didn't know you'd be able to track us with the earpieces. I may have neglected to tell her that," he said, his devious grin on his face.

Andrei snapped his fingers and pointed at Ivan. "Rude."

"You guys heard her at the last. That's how she was the entire time. Hell, she shot the guy that grabbed her off the bike in the face. She had them all worried anytime they talked to her." He looked at me. "Did you see her eyes this time?"

I nodded. When Stephen and I got to her, her eyes were as dark as I'd ever seen them. "They were almost black when we got to her. Were they that dark the whole time?"

"Yeah, but she kept her cool the entire time. She had one conversation in Italian that I couldn't understand, but everything else I heard. She was incredible. She was messing with their heads the entire time," Ivan said. You could hear the pride in his voice when he talked about her.

"What happened when they grabbed you?" Misha asked. I knew he was likely wanting to see how accurate his visions were. I had to admit, I was curious as well.

"They had to be waiting on us. They came out of nowhere and caught me slowing down to turn onto a street. They blocked us. in, but I made a move to drive down the sidewalk. The vehicle in front cut me off. The guys in the vehicles behind us got out and grabbed her off the bike. I didn't see how she got away, but that's when she shot the guy in the face. She was on the way to help me when two more guys rushed her and slammed her into a parked car. One of them held a gun to her head, so I stopped. I'd killed two guys that were on me, but I froze when I saw the gun on her. They took everything off us there and threw us in a vehicle, then stopped along the way to drop the helmets and tracker. I'm sure you guys found everything though," Ivan said.

"She headbutted the guy that grabbed her before she shot him in the face," Misha said. "We went to the scene and I was able to see what happened. It was like it was when she and I saw Trino. I've never been able to see something happen in the past. before."

Ivan raised his eyebrow. "She really did unlock a new level for you, then."

"What happened when Sal was there?" Viktor asked.

Ivan laughed. "Oh, dear G od, she's just so funny without even meaning to be sometimes. She asked what Sal wanted with her. He told her he was originally just going to use her as bait to draw out Boss so he could kill him, but since she'd killed so many of Sal's men, she was now in his debt. He said there was also the matter of his son and her making him look like a fool. He kept trying to touch her, but she kept moving away from him, even though we were tied to the chairs. He unzipped her shirt and just stared at her boobs for a minute. She asked if it was his first time seeing boobs. He slapped her and told her she had a smart mouth and that she'd learn to keep it shut. She told him she didn't care for school and she likely wasn't going to learn it anytime soon. She said she told Anthony the same thing. Oh, I should mention that she called Anthony his 'idiot son.' Sal punched her so hard that her chair tipped over backward. The two guys that grabbed us had to set her back upright. When she could look at him again, she told Sal he punched like a weak old man." Ivan started laughing, but continued. "She said something like she bet he couldn't even get it up and then asked him how many di ck pills he needed to even have sex." We all laughed.

"What happened then? I'm sure that didn't go over well with Sal," Viktor asked.

"Mando stepped in. He told Sal that they wouldn't get as much for her if he kept hitting her. So, Sephie was able to get their plan out of them with her di ck joke," Ivan said. "She's like a bloodhound when it comes to information. But that's when Armando looked at her for the first time and saw her eyes. He was visibly frightened when he saw her. She took advantage of it, too. She told them both they were going to die slowly and painfully. It shook them both enough that they left the room immediately. She did the same to the guys that grabbed us. Apparently, they were discussing whether they could get away with stopping along the way and taking turns raping her. It was in Italian, so I didn't understand it. She didn't say anything to me at the time, but later, she let them know she understood. She told them she was going to enjoy sending them to meet their dead friends."

We all sat in stunned silence. We knew she was incredible, but she just kept impressing us with her ability to withstand whatever was thrown at her.

"Did Sal come back after that?" Andrei asked.

"No. I was expecting him to. I was surprised when it was just Armando. I'm still not entirely sure which one of them is in charge. From what Sephie pulled out of Armando at the end there, I don't think he's ever been in charge. We need to confirm. with her when she wakes up, but I'm guessing it's either Ricardo or Giana's father that have been pulling the strings all along. for Armando," Ivan said.

"I need to do more digging on Ricardo to see if I can find out more about him," Viktor said. "Armando is still alive. They took him to a room. Keith and Chris are making sure he stays there."

I felt Sephie's hand start to jerk. She started to mumble in her sleep, which likely meant she was having a nightmare. I put my hand on her stomach and felt her body shaking. I started talking to her, trying to coax her out of her nightmare. She was still mumbling, but I couldn't understand what she was saying as she was still having trouble speaking. I leaned down, talking softly in her ear, but it didn't stop. The shaking started to get worse.

"Get in bed with her, Boss," Stephen said. "She's probably freezing on top of everything else." He and Andrei stood up to help move her over so I had room to lay beside her. We moved all the tubes coming out of her as carefully as possible and I laid down on her right side, which had the least amount of damage Andrei raised her shoulders up so I could slide my arm under her. When he eased her back toward the bed, she tried to tum toward the Andrei and Stephen both saw it and tried to help her roll on her side so she could lay on me as much as possible Her head rested partially on my shoulder, partially in her usual spot on my chest. Her left atto was in a shing that was secured to her waist keep her shoulder immobile, so she couldn't las acTUKA my chest like she normally did. Her body started to relax as soon as her he on my shoulder and my hand was running sp and doen her back. I felt my body relax being able to hold her unce again.

"F**king adorable," they all said at our

Stephen said, "You guys should get some sleep. I'm still very much on a caffeine high, so I'll take the first shift. I don't like that Sal is still at large."

"Once he finds out about Anthony and Lorenzo, he's going to be unpredictable. Let's hope she doesn't sleep for three days. We may not have that long." Viktor said.

"I can buy us a day or two with that," I said, wiggling my phone out of my pocket. I nodded to Stephen to watch the door to make sure no one came in, then dialed Trino's number.

Chapter Two Hundred Eighty-Six

Adrik

“Jefe, any word?” He picked up on the first ring. He sounded worried.

“She’s fine, Trino. She’s going to need to stay in the hospital a few days though. Armando beat the shi t out of her before we could get to her,” I said.

“I hope he’s already dead.”

“He wishes he was, I can tell you that. He’s still alive though. I plan on drawing it out as long as possible. I want him to suffer.”

“I love this line of thinking, Jefe.”

“That being said, Sal is still at large and I’m a little worried about what he’s going to do once he finds out about Anthony and Lorenzo. I’m not leaving her until she can leave the hospital.”

“Say no more, Jefe. I have the perfect solution. I’ll take care of everything. Sal won’t find out until I’m sure that Sephie is okay. and can leave the hospital. No matter how long it takes.”

“Thanks, Trino. And thanks again for sending Oscar. He’s been an integral part of our fireworks show.”

Trino laughed. “I love that guy. I’ve never met anyone who gets as excited to blow shi t up as that dude. He’s great.”

“He’s good at his job, I will definitely give him that,” I said.

“Keep me updated on Sephie’s condition. How bad is it?” he asked.

“He dislocated her shoulder and broke her arm. She also has five broken ribs and a punctured lung. She’s more blue and purple than anything right now, but she got more information out of both Sal and Armando despite everything that was happening to her. There’s another player behind Armando that we don’t know much about.”

“F**k, Jefe. How did you not kill him?”

“I was well on my way to doing so, but she stopped me. She was having trouble breathing,” I said.

“She’s even more special than I thought if she could stop you in the middle of that,” Trino said.

“You have no idea, Trino. I’ll keep you updated and let you know when she can leave. Thank you again for everything, Trino.”

“De nada, Jefe.”

Viktor ran to one of the vehicles to get a charger for Misha’s phone so we could plug it in for Ivan. Nobody had slept in over two days, so nobody wanted to be woken up to him fighting his past. I didn’t want to put Sephie in danger either. Knowing her, she would wake up just to help him, knowing he was struggling.

I had to admit that listening to her play helped me relax and be able to sleep better, given the situation. Because of her arm in a sling and cast, I couldn’t hold her as close as i wanted to. Because of her chest tube, she needed to be partially sitting up. She was as close to me as her arm in a cast strapped to her waist would allow, but I still managed to pull her legs over mine partially so she would feel even closer. It was frustrating and not ideal, but I found myself drifting off to sleep despite everything.

We were all woken up periodically by nurses coming in to check on her. One nurse clearly wa happy with me being in bed with her, but she didn’t say anything. Perhaps it was the gun on r hip that she didn’t like. Dr. Williams came in that evening to check on her before he left for the day. He chuckled, “one of my nurses went on a rant about you being in bed with her. I told her i could send her home for the day if she had that much of a problem with it. She decided to let it go.”

“She doesn’t know I basically pay her salary. She’ll be out of a job if she doesn’t let it go,” I said sternly.

“I’ll make sure she takes care of everyone else on the floor instead,” he said. “How is she?” he asked pointing at Sephie.

“She’s been mostly quiet. Like Ivan, she has demons that resurface anytime she gets hurt. She started fighting, but as long as she can feel me next to her, she stays calm.” As I said that, she struggled to snuggle closer to me.

“Let’s make sure you stay next to her, then. She needs to stay quiet so she can breathe easily until her lung has a chance to heal a little more,” he said. He looked toward Ivan, who was still sleeping. “How’s he doing?”

“Good so far. As long as he can hear her playing, he stays calm. I assume he was okay when you checked him out earlier?”

“He was as calm as he was when she was with him. You were right, too. She is incredibly talented”

I smiled, feeling that familiar pull in my chest. I loved it when other people saw the greatness in her too.

“I’ll be back in the morning to check on her again. If something happens overnight, the nurses know to call me,” he said.

“Thank you, Dr. Williams. For both of them. I understand it’s a bit of a unique situation we’ve put you in. I appreciate everything you’ve done,” I said. He nodded his head and left quietly.

Sephie stayed quiet for the entire night, as long as her head was resting on my shoulder. She would periodically try to get closer to me, but would struggle to do so each time. Her ribs made it difficult to move without severe pain and her arm in a cast and sling made it awkward for her to lay against me. I tried to hold her as close as possible without hurting her.

Dr. Williams came back the next morning to check on her. He looked at everyone in the room. “You’re all looking slightly more refreshed this morning. I take it you all got a little sleep, at least?” he asked. One of the nurses had brought in an extra bed the night before, so the guys rotated through the beds during the night. Each time a nurse came in to check on Sephie, they would rotate. It wasn’t ideal, but they weren’t going to complain if it meant staying close to her,

There were quiet grunts in response to Dr. Williams’ question. He chuckled. “I’m guessing you guys likely haven’t eaten, either. I can have food sent up. You’ll feel better once you can eat, as well.” He turned to me. “How did she do last night?”

“She was quiet. She’s tried to move closer to me a few times, but struggles to do so. It makes her frustrated, even in her sleep,” I said.

“She’s going to be in a good bit of pain for a while. Her bruising is deep. And I know I don’t have. to tell you how painful broken ribs are.” He walked to the side of the bed opposite from me. Het put his hands up, looking at me. “I need to check her,” he said, before he touched her, like he was asking my permission.

I tried to sit up so I wouldn’t be in the way. He lifted the blanket off her, then lifted the hospital gown she was wearing to look at her chest tube. I heard the guys cursing quietly as they saw the bruises that covered her body. Dr. Williams checked everything, then said, “I need to roll her onto her back. She has so much bruising that I want to be sure I didn’t miss something that’s causing her to bleed internally.”

Andrei and Misha stood up immediately to help shift her onto her back. They gently lifted her and turned her so the doctor could have access. As he palpated her abdomen, she started mumbling. He heard her and took note of it, but continued his exam. I could see her body start to shake the longer she was away from me. Dr. Williams felt it too. “That’s concerning,” he said.

“That’s what happens when she’s away from him,” Ivan said.

“It’ll stop once we put her back on him,” Misha said.

“Intriguing,” he said as he continued his exam. When he was satisfied that there was nothing going on internally that he needed to worry about, he stepped back to let Andrei and Misha move her back closer to me. Dr. Williams stood and watched as the mumbling quieted and her body relaxed as soon as her head was on my chest once again. “That’s not something I see, ever,” he said as he stared at Sephie, like he was completely lost in thought over what he’d just witnessed.

Ivan didn’t say a word, but he stood up and walked silently to the bed, standing in between Sephie and the doctor, his arms crossed across his chest. It was enough to break whatever thought pattern was going on in his head. “I’ll come back in a few hours to check on her again. From what I can see, she’s doing well. She might be able to get the chest tube out earlier than I thought, but she’ll still need to stay here for observation for a day once it comes out. We want to make sure it won’t need to go back in,” he said as he walked toward the door. “I’ll have food sent up, as well.” He closed the door quietly behind him.

We all looked at Ivan, somewhat puzzled. “Doctors are all the same. As soon as they find something that can’t be explained with their science, they want to study it. I’ll die before I let that happen to her,” he said, clearly bristled. “I’ve seen that look way too many times before.”

“Let’s hope she continues to make improvements quickly so we can get her out of here,” Andrei said. “I’d also rather get my own food than rely on what he sends up.”

“Fair point. I’ll tell the doctor it’s not needed,” Viktor said. We could hear the edge to his voice as he stood to leave the room. I smiled, as I kissed the top of Sephie’s head. Viktor rarely got angry, but when it came to her, he would destroy whatever he perceived to be a threat, no questions. asked.

Chapter Two Hundred Eighty-Seven

Sephie

I knew I was in a hospital by the smell. That's a smell that you don't find anywhere else. I could hear voices in and out. I knew the guys were with me. I felt Adrik's hand in mine. I could hear Ivan telling them what happened. My body reacted when Ivan was going through the events while we were in that room. I heard Adrik talking to me, trying to calm me, but it wasn't working. The shaking got worse. I could feel it, but it also felt like I didn't have control over my own body. There was a disconnect between my brain and my body. I was trying to move, but I couldn't.

I felt Andrei's warmer than average hands under my shoulders and Stephen's ice-cold hands on my legs, lifting me gently. I could feel the bed dip beside me as Adrik laid down next to me. I could smell him. I just wanted to be close to him. When Andrei gently eased me back toward the bed, I knew I wasn't close enough to Adrik, but I couldn't move right. I struggled to turn toward him, hoping they would see.

I couldn't do anything. I couldn't see. I couldn't speak. I couldn't move. But I could hear. And I could feel. Andrei and Stephen did notice my struggle and turned me so I could be closer to Adrik. As soon as they put my head on his shoulder, my body relaxed and the shaking subsided. I wanted to be closer still, but this would have to do for now.

I was in and out of consciousness throughout the…day? Night? I had no idea what day it was. Or what night it was. It didn't really matter, to be honest. My body stayed relaxed as long as I was close to Adrik.

I heard the doctor come in and tell Adrik that he wanted to check me. I felt Adrik shift underneath me and I knew I was going to start shaking again. I tried to tell him, but I still couldn't speak. Whatever they sedated me with this time was taking longer to wear off. I didn't like it. I couldn't control my own body.

I felt the doctor's hands checking me over. I felt Andrei and Misha move me. I felt the shaking start once I was, apart from Adrik. I felt Andrei and Misha put me back against Adrik, but then I felt a very weird feeling. It was much the same as when Sal was staring at my boobs and Armando was looking at me half-naked, I didn't like it. It didn't last long, however. I couldn't see and I couldn't hear him, but I knew Ivan was standing over me. Since we were grabbed, I'd been able to feel him much the same way I could feel Adrik, just not as strongly. He had his own energy signature. I knew he was standing over me, protecting me. It was a different feeling with Ivan. With Adrik, it felt like he was standing with me, beside me, anytime he was being protective with me, With Ivan, it was like a protective bubble that he put me in, while he stood guard against whatever he perceived to be the threat. The weird, gross feeling went away almost immediately and I knew it was Ivan silently daring the doctor to continue whatever it was that was making me have this feeling. I finally felt the doctor leave the room.

I also heard Ivan's voice talking to the guys, but it was hard to hear anything except Ivan for a few minutes. I knew Adrik was still with me, but the protective bubble that Ivan put me in blocked everything else out.

I woke up again, after sleeping for who knows how long. Adrik was still as close to me as possible, his arm hoiding me gently but firmly. I knew he was asleep, because his hand was still. When he was awake, his hand would lightly run up and down my back. I tried to move my body to see if it would work yet. This time I could open my eyes. Everything was blurry for a moment, but the room started to come into focus. I knew I wouldn't be able to move the arm: that was in a sling and I was laying on my good arm. I tried to wiggle my toes. It

actually worked this time, so I tried to move my foot, then my lower leg. Everything worked. Finally.

I stretched my legs and immediately regretted it. Shooting pain through my entire body caused me to let out something in between a scream, a yelp, and a cough. Adrik was jolted awake, as were the guys. Adrik was immediately concerned and we were quickly surrounded by each one of the guys.

"Sephie, what's wrong?" Adrik asked. He was looking me over, trying to figure out what happened. He noticed. my eyes were open and stopped to look at me, his wide smile stretching across his face. "I missed you," he said. quietly.

I tried to talk, but nothing came out. My throat felt horribly dry. I ended up coughing once, which made me wince in extreme pain.

"You shouldn't try to talk yet, spider monkey. You need water first," Andrei said as he walked to a table next to another bed in the room. There was a small pitcher there, with water in it. He poured a small amount of water into a cup and brought it to me. While he fetched me water, Misha and Viktor helped move me and adjust the bed so I could sit up a little more. Sitting up made it easier to breathe, so I was thankful for the change.

Andrei handed me the water, saying, "slowly," with a stern look on his face. I smiled weakly at him as I drank the water. Oh, that felt good.

"Once you keep that down, you can have more," Ivan said. "Can you blink?" I blinked my eyes to show him. "Good. Two blinks for yes, one blink for no," he said. I nodded my head once.

"Are you in pain, solnishko?" Adrik asked. I blinked twice. He cursed under his breath.

"Can you breathe better now?" Ivan asked. Two blinks."

"Are you nauseous?" Andrei asked. I thought for a minute, then blinked once. I wasn't happy about not being. in control of my body for so long, but at least I wasn't nauseous this time. He went to refill the cup with water? He poured a little bit more this time, then handed it back to me. I drank it slowly. My body felt weak. And painful.

"Do you want to know who won the bet on how long it took them to find us?" Ivan asked, a grin on his bruised. and battered face. Two blinks. "Technically, neither of us. 30 hours," he said, smiling at me.

"You were closer," I managed to say in a whisper. "I'm glad." I smiled at all the guys and leaned my head toward Adrik. Andrei refilled my cup yet again. This time, he filled it up completely. I drank part of it, but then handed it to Adrik, who finished it. I was sure he hadn't had anything to eat or drink the whole time I'd been out. He drank it quickly, handing the empty cup back to Andrei. I gave Adrik a sympathetic look for keeping him trapped yet again.

"Don't you dare try to apologize," he said. "I would stay here until the end of time with you." He leaned over and kissed my forehead gently.

"How long?" I whispered.

Viktor looked at his watch. "Right about 24 hours this time, but considering what you went through, I'd say

you're ahead of schedule, sestrichka," he said, giving me a wink and his broad, handsome smile.

I smiled back at him, but it was weak. Everything felt weak. And painful. So painful.

"How much pain are you in, princess? On a scale of 1-10," Ivan asked. I thought for a minute, taking inventory of my body. I held up 5 fingers, then 3 fingers. "So, like a 13 for normal people, then?" Ivan asked, grinning at

1.

"Do you want some pain meds? The doctor said you were going to be in severe pain for a couple days," Adrik said. He could tell by the look on my face that I wasn't happy with that option. He smiled softly at me. "I'm not sure ibuprofen is going to be enough for this time, love."

"How much longer do I have to stay here?' I whispered.

"You still have a chest tube in, but the doctor said that might be able to come out soon. You have to stay another day after that comes out to make sure your lung stays inflated, then you should be able to leave," Ivan said.

I peeked underneath the hospital gown that I was wearing, trying to find the chest tube. "Can we take it out now?" I asked quietly as I was looking. Adrik grabbed my hand, pulling me very gently against him. He was laughing at me, but he was also still concerned about me. He looked at his watch. "The doctor should be coming back soon to check on you before he leaves for the day. We can ask him then."

Chapter Two Hundred Eighty-Eight

Sephie

I looked at Ivan, noting that he'd been cleaned up and had a fresh set of clothes on. "How?" I asked, pointing at him. I was sure they would know what I was asking, so I didn't feel the need to elaborate or use any more energy than absolutely necessary.

"The recording of you playing worked so the doctor could stitch him up and make sure nothing was broken. We've all been listening to it off and on while Ivan sleeps. So far, he hasn't woken up fighting." Misha said.

I looked at Ivan, remembering him standing over me the last time the doctor checked me. "What made you protect me from the doctor?" I asked, my voice still only barely above a whisper.

He raised his eyebrow. "How do you know that, princess?"

"I can feel you now too. Not as strong though." I stopped to take a breath. "I could hear all your conversations too. I just couldn't move," I said, trying to breathe as deeply as I could.

"Really?" Adrik and Ivan both asked at the same time. I laughed quietly at them, nodding my head.

"Different, though," I said. I looked back at Ivan, still wanting to know what the doctor did. "You were right to do what you did. It felt gross whatever he did."

"He was looking at you the way the doctors at the facility looked at me when they were excited about a new experiment they wanted to try on me," Ivan said.

"It felt the same when Sal was staring at my boobs. And Armando cut my clothes off," I said, taking as deep a breath as I could manage after getting the words out. I coughed once, which made Andrei quickly get more water for me. "You're my favorite, Bubba," I said as he handed me a full cup of water again. I glanced at everyone's tense faces at the mention of Sal and Armando while I drank more water. "Armando?" I asked quietly.

"He's still alive, sestrichka. He's in a room. Chris said he's trying to talk his way out by saying Boss has crazy and put him in there for no reason," Viktor said.

gone

I closed my eyes for a moment, trying not to get angry. I felt Adrik tighten his hold on me. He pressed his cheek against mine, trying to help me stay calm. I took as deep a breath as I could. When I opened my eyes and looked at the guys, they were all surprised.

"Holy shi t, you were not lying, Ivan," Misha said. He looked at Adrik. "Does she feel calm to you, Boss?" I felt Adrik nod his head, his cheek still pressed lightly to mine. I was smiling at them, knowing they were talking about my eyes. I didn't feel out of control angry, but I was certain my eyes told a different story.

"They were like that the whole time they had us," Ivan said. "But she never once lost her cool." He looked at me with a look of pride on his face.

We were interrupted by the doctor coming in to check on me. "Oh, good. You're awake now," he said as he

walked into the room. The guys took a small step back from the bed, but didn't leave. They gave the doctor just enough space to do what was needed, but they were making sure to stay close to me while he was in the room. Adrik pulled me closer to him as the doctor approached the bed. Even though it hurt, I was grateful for him doing so. "How are you feeling?" Dr. Williams asked as he looked over my chart.

"Like shi t," I said quietly. Dr. Williams chuckled.

"How's your breathing? Can you take a deep breath in?" I did as instructed. My ribs were still incredibly painful, so I couldn't breathe as deeply as I wanted to. "Good." He looked at Adrik, asking, "have you heard her wheezing at all?" Adrik shook his head no. "What about coughing?"

"Only when she tries to talk too much," Ivan said.

"That's to be expected," Dr. Williams said. "You're probably going to have a harder time talking and doing normal, everyday things for a few days. Take everything very slowly. It'll make it easier on your lungs to keep up. I'd like to take the chest tube out and see how you do." I nodded my head, eagerly. If me staying in the hospital was dependent on that thing coming out, then I wanted it out as soon as possible.

"Can I get out of bed?" I asked quietly.

"After your chest tube comes out, you can walk for short distances. You'll need to take your IV stand with you, but a little bit of movement will be good for the rest of your body. You're going to be sore, though. How much pain are you in?"

"I'm okay," I said. I was worried about him giving me pain meds that would knock me out for days at a time. I would rather suffer through it. Ivan caught my eye. I looked at him sternly, trying to silently tell him to keep his mouth closed.

"Why do I feel like you're lying?" Dr. Williams asked,

"I've had worse, doc. I'll be fine," I said. My tone was short enough that I was hoping he would let the matter drop. I was trying not to maintain eye contact with him, as I didn't want him to notice if my eyes turned dark. I glanced at the guys, who all had sympathetic looks on their faces. They knew why I was refusing pain meds.

Dr. Williams just sighed. "I'll get a nurse to get your chest tube out shortly. Then you can try going for a short. walk in the hallway. I don't want you to overdo it though. How's your appetite? Are you nauseous?" I shook my head no. "Good. We can give you a few snacks and see how you do with those, then you can have more substantial food." He looked to Viktor. "Or would you rather get food for her too?"

"We'll take care of it," Viktor said. I was curious as to what that conversation had been like, but I would wait to

ask about that later.

Dr. Williams nodded at Viktor, then said, "I'll have a nurse come in shortly. I'll be back in the morning to see how you're doing." He smiled at me before leaving the room.

Once the doctor was out of the room, Ivan looked at me, his broad smile across his face. "Princess, do you know what you're doing with your eyes now?" I looked at him, completely confused. "Your eyes were totally normal when you were talking to the doctor, then you said you were okay and looked at me. Your eyes went

dark as ever when you looked at me, then back to normal the next time you looked at the doctor. If you're doing it on purpose, I'm impressed as hell. If you're not doing it on purpose, then your eyes are telling you that you should be."

"I didn't do it on purpose, I don't think. I didn't want you to tell him I'd told you how much pain I'm in. He's going to give me pain meds that make me sick or knock me out. I don't want that. We can't afford to stay in here for a week just so I can wake up pain free like Sleeping Beauty." I stopped to breathe, but then added, "I also didn't want him to notice my eyes changing. You guys don't need another reason to want to hurt him."

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 289

Chapter Two Hundred Eighty-Nine

Sephie

The chest tube came out quickly. The nurse made me stay in bed for half an hour after it came out, just to make sure my lung would stay inflated and functioning properly. Once the half hour was up, she came in and told me I could get out of bed. I wanted to get out of bed as much for Adrik as I did for me. I still felt guilty for keeping him trapped with me. I knew a short walk would do him good, too.

I'd had bruised ribs before, but never broken ribs. Both were not something I wished to ever have to deal with again. Every single movement caused pain in my ribs. Andrei and Viktor were there to help me sit up on the edge of the bed. My hospital gown wasn't secured, so they all got a full view of the bruises down my left side. 1 heard collective cursing.

“If

you

won't take pain meds from the doctor, will you let me go get you some ibuprofen?” Viktor asked. “I can get snacks, too,” he added, grinning at me.

“I'm more excited about the snacks, if I'm being honest,” I said, trying to pull the st upid hospital gown around me. “Can you get me some clothes too? This thing makes me want to murder people.”

“You got it,” Viktor said, laughing at me.

Adrik stood in front of me. “Hold on to me,” he said as he helped me stand. Once I was standing, he wrapped the hospital gown around me, tying it so it would stay in place. His hand brushed against my skin. “Grab her a pair of my sweatpants and a hoodie. She's freezing,” he told Viktor.

“She's going to be living in your hoodies until her arm comes out of this cast,” Ivan said as he thumped the cast with his finger. “I can't imagine your tiny little shirts being able to fit over that thing.”

“My shirts are not that tiny. Your shirts are just giant in comparison,” I said grumpily.

“Ok, she needs snacks. I'll be back as quickly as possible,” Viktor said, laughing. He left the hospital room quickly.

Adrik offered me his arm as I walked slowly to the door. My legs felt fine. Sore, but fine. That's a good sign. Being able to walk around always made me feel better, no matter how much pain I was in. Misha and Ivan walked out of the room ahead of us, with Andrei and Stephen behind us. It was still early enough in the evening that people were still visiting friends and family that were in the hospital, so the hallway wasn't empty. We got plenty of strange looks as I walked at a snail's pace down the hallway with my giants.

“Can I tell them I'm the go d da mn princess? Will it make them stop staring at me?” I asked Adrik quietly, speaking Russian so we wouldn't be understood. He laughed at me, leaning over to kiss my cheek. “You can tell them whatever you like, solnishko. Or I can have them all killed for looking at you. Say the word,” he said, grinning at me.

“Don't tempt me,” I said.

Viktor was back shortly after my excursion into the hallway. “I lied. I'm more excited about the sweatpants

than anything.” I said as he handed Adrik a bag with clothes for me in it.

Ivan and Stephen were the closest ones this time, so they helped pick me up and move me to the edge of the bed. I was impressed with how gentle they all were, given their massive size. Adrik helped me put his sweatpants on. They were a few sizes too big for me, so he rolled the waistband and tied them tight enough they would stay up. He glanced at the guys, the sweatshirt in his hand. They all turned their backs to me, so as not to see all of me. Adrik carefully took the hospital gown off and replaced it with the sweatshirt, leaving my left arm out of the sleeve.

“Sweet, now it looks like I only have one arm,” I said, playing with the empty sleeve. I smacked Adrik with it as he helped me sit back on the edge of the bed. “Oh, this is going to get me in trouble.”

Adrik looked to Viktor. “Definitely needs snacks.” Viktor threw a protein bar at Adrik, who ripped the wrapper open with his teeth and handed it to me. As soon as the protein bar was in my hand, my stomach woke up.

“I don't know why men think women are that complicated. Keep us warm and give us snacks. It's not rocket science,” I said, taking a bite..

“I feel like most women are slightly more complicated than you are, spider monkey,” Andrei said.

“That's fair. Totally fair.”

Once I ate one protein bar and managed to keep it down, I was starving. I ate three more in the span of an hour. Viktor had also brought me some ibuprofen, so I took that, which helped take the edge off the pain. Ant hour after I took my first dose of superprofen, Ivan asked, “what's your pain level now, princess?” I thought for, a moment, then held up four fingers. “So, an 8 for normal people, then?” he said, grinning at me. I was starting) to feel more like myself, despite my pain. I felt like I could finally smile genuinely back at him.

“Ah, there it is,” Misha said. “Viktor, she's gonna need more protein bars. Maybe get her some beef jerky or something, too. Clearly protein makes her soul return to her body.”

I laughed, but grabbed my ribs with my good arm. “F**k. Laughing is not an approved activity right now. I'm currently regretting bringing out your hilarious side.” I felt Adrik shift me so I was leaning back against him, his arm around me protectively.

“How much easier is it to talk now, princess?” Ivan asked.

“It's better. I can breathe a little easier sitting up,” I said. “You want to know about when I was with Armando, don't you?”

He chuckled, nodding his head. Stephen said, “we all heard that conversation. What happened when you asked him about who was pulling the strings?”

“Ricardo,” I said. “He wasn't looking at me until I said Ricardo's name, then he looked at me. I could tell he was livid that I had said Ricardo's name, but he was also afraid. There was fear in his eyes. When he walked back over to me after I said all that to him, it was the only time I was actually afraid for my life. If you guys hadn't shown up when you did, he might've killed me.” Adrik tried to pull me closer, but it was difficult given my sling. He nodded to Andrei and Ivan, who both stood and walked over to the bed. “Pick her up so she can.

lay back against me,” he said. They lifted me gently, while Adrik moved underneath me. They put me dow between his legs so I was leaning back against his torso. He wrapped both arms around me, his legs on eith side of mine. I leaned my head back and kissed his cheek. “This is much better,” I said quietly

Chapter Two Hundred Ninety

Sephie

Viktor took his computer out of one of the bags he brought back. “I still don’t understand how Ricardo could be pulling the strings with Armando. What does he have over him?”

“I don’t think life is as rosy for Armando as we’ve been led to believe. When he first cut my clothes off me, he told me I was going to solve a lot of his problems. He got pissed when he saw how bruised I was from them. slamming me into the car when they grabbed us because I wouldn’t fetch as much money. That’s when I told him about my back. He turned me around and saw my scars and that’s when he lost it.”

“Why would Armando be needing money? He’s worth more than the other bosses,” Andrei said.

“Maybe he’s only worth more on paper. He could be in debt to someone or several people and be struggling to pay them back. Just because he has plenty of assets on paper doesn’t mean any of those are actual liquid assets. He might be strapped for cash,” Adrik said.

“The million-dollar question is why he’d be strapped for cash,” Ivan said. “Princess, you didn’t overhear them. talking at all when they were both there, did you?”

“No, I only heard the other two guys speaking Italian. Sal and Armando kept their conversations completely private when they were both there. Armando never said anything in Italian in front of me. Neither did Sal. Only those other two dudes.” I thought about what I’d said to Armando for a few moments, trying to remember, all the details that the guys might’ve missed. “The exact moment when you guys came into the chat escapes me. Did you guys hear me asking him about Sal?”

“No, what did you say?” Stephen asked.

“I was trying to make him angry when he found out that I was damaged goods, basically.” Adrik clicked his tongue, flexing his arms around my waist. I know he wanted to squeeze me, but he didn’t want to hurt me. “It was part of trying to make him mad. I told him he might’ve been able to sell me with just a front picture, but because I was bruised all the angles were just f**ked up. I asked him what Sal was going to do when he found out that I wasn’t going to fetch top dollar and what he was going to do when he found out it was Armando that f**ked it up. That’s when he snapped. There’s something to Sal and there’s something to Ricardo,” I said. “And also f**k him for thinking I was damaged goods. That is all.”

“What if we’re looking in the wrong spot?” Stephen asked. “There’s somebody behind Armando and likely has been for a very long time. Seph thinks Lorenzo is really the brains behind Sal. What if Ricardo and Lorenzo are the connection and we’ve missed it?”

I could hear Viktor starting a new search after hearing Stephen’s theory.

“What did your father think of Armando?” I asked. Adrik would only speak about his father on rare occasions. Their relationship was strained, but respectful. On some level, Adrik understood what his father did to keep him safe and make sure he could survive this world. On another level, that also meant that Adrik didn’t really have a solid father figure in his life. Viktor was more of a father figure to Adrik than Vitaliy. Since handing over the business to Adrik, Vitaliy had basically disappeared. He would resurface from time to time for a few days,

but then he would be gorie for years. Adrik knew how to get in touch with him, if he needed to. He just never needed to.

Adrik sighed. “As far as I know, he had a good relationship with Armando. Armando was new to being a boss when my father handed everything over to me. I think Armando just did whatever my father told him to do, not many questions asked. He told me when I took over that Armando would never be a problem. He was under the impression that Armando was an idiot.”

“I think I agree. He’s an idiot, but he’s also a psycho. It’s a very weird combination. You guys heard him confess what he did to his first wife, right?”

“I missed that part. It was hard to hear everything with the guys trying to make me less pretty,” Ivan said, smiling. He motioned like he was flipping his non-existent hair over his shoulder.

“He told me he beat her to death when she wouldn’t shut up. I asked him if he’d gotten her hooked on coke the same way he did Giana. He didn’t know we knew about that, so it stumped him for a minute. I asked him if he knew that coke was a stimulant and told him if he wanted his wife to be quiet that he should’ve gone with heroin or another opioid. He looked genuinely confused. That’s where the idiot part comes in. That’s also when I first asked him who was pulling his strings, because he was clearly too stupid to have stayed in this business for this long without help. He did not like that,” I said.

“Dario was right about Armando’s first wife,” Misha said.

“Yeah, I remembered that part too,” I said. “Now I’m curious to know how Dario knew.”

“It might be worth having another conversation with Dario. He might tell us more when he sees that we have Armando,” Misha said.

“I agree, but I think Sal is his biggest fear, after Massimo,” I said. “Sal is what made him react. Armando just made him angry.”

Viktor, who had been quietly searching for information while we were all talking, got up and brought his computer to me. “Do you feel up to translating this?” he asked.

“For you? Of course,” I said, winking at him. I scanned over the article. “This one is old. From before Lorenzo got banished. It’s talking about how he took over the docks. ‘Injecting new life into the failing import business, it says. He made a deal with an Italian exporter to bring goods into the city.” I looked up from the computer. “I’ll give you guys one guess who the Italian exporter is.”

“Ricardo,” they all said.

“Winner winner chicken dinner,” I said. I finished reading the article to make sure there wasn’t anything I missed. There was a link to a second article that I clicked to see what else I could find. “Here’s one from a few years later. It says that in the span of 6 months, four boats were found coming into the docks loaded with people.”

“It appears Lorenzo has been in the flesh trade longer than we thought,” Viktor said.

“This article doesn’t mention Ricardo, but I’d be willing to bet if we dug a little, those boats belong to him,” I said. Viktor got up and took his computer back, to see what else he could find.

Adrik sighed. “This is much bigger than the bosses trying to take the city from me.”

“Which is why you need to teach them a lesson so no one will ever think about trying it again. There’s a reason history remembers Vlad the Impaler’s name hundreds of years later. Savagery has its place,” I said. Adrik tightened his hold on me. I grinned at Stephen, asking, “Yoden, what was Vlad like in real life? Was he cranky? I feel like he was cranky.”

“All Romanians come across as cranky, Seph. But Vlad? Surprisingly sarcastic. Liked dad jokes, too. Odd combination, but it worked with him,” he said with a straight face like it was the God’s honest truth.

“What about the impaling? I feel like you helped him come up with that idea.”

“No, that was all Vlad. I just supported his dreams. It’s called enabling. I invented that,” he said, still completely straight-faced.

I tried to hold it in, but I couldn’t help but laugh, which caused me to grab my ribs in pain. “I did this to myself,” I whined as I waited for the pain in my ribs to subside.

Chapter Two Hundred Ninety-One

Sephie

I got up several times throughout the night to walk down the hallway. Everyone's sleep schedule was screwed up, so we would all nap for a few hours, get up and make a few trips up and down the hallway, then nap some more. It was much nicer at night, because the hallways were basically deserted. I did, however, get plenty of odd looks from the nurses since the guys insisted on escorting me each time.

"How bad do I actually look?" I asked Adrik quietly. I'd gone to the bathroom a few times, but I refused to lool at myself in the mirror. I knew it wasn't going to be pretty and I just didn't want to put myself through that yet. I could see the bruises on my body, so I was sure my face made a matching set.

"Your face is bruised, but not as bad as your body, solnishko. Maybe it's the Russian that makes them nervous. They all think we're talking about them. But I think it's more that we won't let you go anywhere without us. They're not used to seeing a princess in real life," he said, smiling at me.

"Who knew being royalty was such a burden to bear?" I said, flipping my three-day old braid over my shoulder. I was sure my hair was resembling a rat's nest at this point, but I didn't really care. There wasn't anything I could do about it with only one functioning arm, so I was resigned to it being completely out of control.

Viktor, who was behind us this time, said, "I can redo that for you. Or you're going to end up with a dreadlock before you can get out of here." I picked up the empty sleeve of Adrik's sweatshirt I was wearing and turned to point it at him. "You, sir, are my favorite."

"Hey, no fair. Just because the rest of us have never had long hair and don't know how to braid doesn't mean Viktor gets to be the favorite," Misha said. I could tell he was just trying to stir sh*t up for the fun of it. We were all going a little stir crazy being stuck here.

As we walked back in the room, Viktor closed the door then said, "I think your ability to see things as they happen, both past and present now, trumps my knowledge of how to braid, Misha."

"Wait, past?" I asked as I walked to the bed. I hated that I felt tired after two trips up and down the hallway, but I needed to sit down. I sat on the edge of the bed, gingerly.

Misha sat on the other bed in the room, across from me. "So, when Boss called you the Game Master, I think he nailed it. You definitely unlocked a new level for me when we saw Trino," he said.

"How so?" I asked, as I tried to gingerly scoot farther onto the bed.

"I've never been able to see things that happened in the past before. But the night you and Ivan were taken, we went to the spot where they grabbed you. I could see everything that happened, like it was happening in front of me. I saw them grab you off the bike. I saw you scream to make the guy that grabbed you think you were weak, then I saw you headbutt him as hard as you possibly could to get free. I saw you shoot him. I saw you try to shoot the guys that were on Ivan, but you stopped. I saw them slam you into the car and point a gun to your head. I saw Ivan kill two of the guys that were on him, but he stopped when they pulled a gun on you. I saw them take everything from you and zip tie your hands in front of you and then throw you into the vehicle. It was plain as day to me when it happened and it was like I was watching it in real-time. It's never happened

like that before," Misha said, running his hand through his black hair.

"That's pretty incredible, Misha. That's everything that happened as I remember it," I said.

Adrik walked to the bed, putting one arm gingerly around my shoulders, the other under my legs, mindful of the IV tubes still attached to me. He lifted me farther onto the bed so I could lean back against the bed instead of having to keep myself upright.

"That's not all he can do now," he said, as he kissed my forehead once he had placed me on the bed.

"There's more?"

Adrik nodded his head. "He saw the building where they took you. He narrowed down the part of town you were in considerably, which made it easier to find you through the earpieces. But even after Chen connected to your earpiece, we still weren't completely sure what building you were in. It only narrowed down the possibilities. It was Keith that randomly told us what building you guys were in."

"How did you see what building they took us to?" I asked Misha.

"I had to have Boss's help for that. He thought about you, about finding you, and I was able to see the building. It was what I kind of assume happened when we saw Trino. You were thinking about Trino and it amplified what I could see. Boss was thinking about you and it amplified what I could see," Misha said. "But it was so dark that I never could see the address on the building. Keith made it easy for us. He gave us the address."

"Keith took Armando to the building? Does he know Ivan and I were there?" I asked, I could feel myself starting to get angry at the possibility of yet another betrayal.

Adrik leaned down and kissed my forehead again, laughing softly. "He didn't know, love. He's still on the good list. For now."

"Put your demon eyes away, Seph. Armando wouldn't tell Keith and Chris why he needed to go to that building. Keith said Armando was acting funny and that he had a bad feeling about it all, so he gave us the address. At that time, he didn't know you and Ivan had even been taken," Stephen said, smiling at me.

"I do not have demon eyes," I said, matter-of-factly. Andrei threw another protein bar onto the bed beside me, his broad smile across his face. "I hate you," I said as I opened the wrapper and took a bite. I got halfway through the protein bar and then added, "I'm sorry for what I said when I was hungry. I didn't mean it."

0 Just to prove there were no hard feelings, Andrei stood up and got me a cup of water. "You're my favorite, spider monkey. Especially when you're cranky from hunger."

"When did you fill Keith and Chris in on the fact that Ivan and I were in that building?" I asked, finishing my middle of the night snack.

"He gave us the address after the first time Armando was there. Keith said he was scheduled to return the following morning, which is when we planned to get you out. We wanted to catch Armando there. We were hoping to catch Sal there, too. We watched Keith and Chris drive up with Armando, but he told them to wait in the vehicle. Once Armando was inside, I made a call to Keith and told them to get out of there. I also told them not to answer their phones should Armando call them. They knew something was up, but they still don't have all the details. They just know Armando is in deep sh*t and is in a room," Stephen said.

"That's who Armando called, I bet. He was livid when they didn't answer. He smashed his phone."

"Is that when you told them to jump off the roof? I have to admit that was my favorite part," Stephen said.

"I think it was everyone's favorite part. That was hilarious," Andrei said.

"I'm going to remind Armando that you warned him. People just don't listen to us, gazelle," Misha said, faking being indignant.

"I really want to laugh right now, but it's going to hurt so much," I said, trying to hold back my laughter.

Chapter Two Hundred Ninety-Two

Sephie

After my midnight walk and snack, I ended up falling asleep for a few hours again. I was woken up by one the nurses coming in yet again to check on me. The guys were still asleep, Adrik was only pretending to be asleep next to me. I could feel his thumb tracing circles on my back under his sweatshirt. He was growing impatient with the constant interruptions to his sleep. I couldn't blame him. We all were.

The nurse noticed I was awake. "How are you feeling?" she asked.

"I'm okay," I said quietly.

"You're still able to breathe normally?" I nodded my head. She glanced around at the guys, checking to see if they were still sleeping. "Can I ask you a question?" she asked quietly. I nodded my head again, curious as to what she wanted to know. "Are you the girl that kept that guy from killing the doctor and the nurses in the ER a few months ago?"

I smiled, once again trying not to laugh. I nodded my head again. "You heard about that?" I asked.

Her eyes went wide. "The entire hospital has heard about that," she said. "You're a legend. None of us know how you did it. I worked a shift with one of the nurses who was in the ER when they were trying to sedate him. She said she's never seen anything like it in her life. Nothing worked. They gave him enough to kill a horse and he just kept getting up. They thought he was on some new kind of drug nobody had seen yet. She was scared for her life, then you showed up. She said you just whispered something to him and he laid there, perfectly still. There are plenty of theories about what happened, but nobody can come up with a viable answer."

I took as deep of a breath as I could. "He wasn't on drugs. And he's not a monster. He's one of my favorite people." I sighed. "I don't have any special powers, either. I simply accept him for who he is. Everyone has demons. He has more than most people, and for good reason. He's been through things no human should have to endure. But I love him for it. I love all his broken parts and pieces because they still make the man that would readily give his life to save mine. Sometimes people who've been through serious trauma need an anchor in the storms of their psyche. I'm that for him. And it's not something that you're going to be able to scientifically explain, either. Science is the death of magic and certain things are only explained by magic."

She looked somewhat perplexed by my explanation, like her brain couldn't comprehend my words. I held her gaze until she got frustrated and left. When he heard the door click, Adrik said quietly, "she 100% thinks you're a witch now." It caught me so off-guard that I laughed, which quickly turned to me cursing as softly as I could so as not to wake the guys. He opened his eyes, looking at his watch. "It's close enough for your next superprofen that I think it's okay if you take it now. You clearly need it, witch," he said, grinning at me.

"Stop making me laugh. It f**king hurts," I said, holding my ribs with my good arm. I smiled at him, still grinning at me, then said, "okay, don't stop. I love it. And I love you, witch lover."

Adrik moved slowly, so as not to hurt me. He pulled his arm that was around me back to him and propped himself up on his elbow. He was still smiling at me as he leaned closer to me and kissed me gently. His lips lingered on mine and I found myself wanting more. I parted my lips, taking his top lip between mine softly. His palm rested against my face, his thumb tracing lightly against my bruised cheek. I leaned into his hand,

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Chapter Two Hundred Ninety-Two

wanting desperately to not be in pain so I could kiss him the way I wanted to. I felt him smile against my lips. "Me too, solnishko. Me too," he said as he got up to get my next dose of superprofen and some water. "Are you hungry again?" he asked as he walked back to me.

"No, I'm okay. It works faster if I don't eat anyway," I said. Adrik clicked his tongue at me. "Do you have more pain than usual?" he asked, climbing back into the tiny hospital bed with me.

"It's nothing specific. My everything hurts. This bed sucks. I'm cold. I want to shower, but I still haven't figured out how that's going to work with this thing keeping my arm strapped down. And I want real food. And I want to leave. Okay, so that was more specific than originally thought," I said, smiling at him.

Adrik glanced at his watch. "I think you'll be able to leave in a few hours. I wanted to make sure your lung was okay before I took you home. That's not something we can fix or help with. But it seems like you're doing well without the chest tube, so I think the doctor will release you. If not, I think he can be persuaded. I'm very persuasive when I need to be," he said, sliding his arm around me gently. I laughed softly at him. "Incredibly persuasive," I said as I laid my head as far onto his shoulder and chest as I could manage.

The doctor was back early that morning, which I was happy for. "How are you feeling this morning?" he asked.

"Like I want to go home," I said. I might've been grumpy, so it came across a little harsher than I meant for it to.

Dr. Williams laughed. "How has your breathing been? Still no wheezing? No sharp pains?"

"Only when I laugh, but otherwise I can breathe as well as anybody with five broken ribs can, so I should be able to leave," I said. The guys laughed at me, but I knew they were just as ready to leave as I was.

"I want to take a few x-rays before you leave, just to make sure," Dr. Williams said. "I'll schedule them for later today and you'll be able to go home tonight."

"Or, hear me out here, here's an alternate plan. You do them now and I leave after. I like my plan better."

"I like her plan better too, doc. I think you should go with her plan," Adrik said, seriously. Just for emphasis, every one of the guys stood up, arms crossed across their chests. They didn't say a word, but it was enough to make Dr. Williams understand.

"It's a good plan. We'll go with your plan. I'll have the nurse come get you right away," he said, leaving the room quickly.

Once the door closed behind him, I said. "I can't tell you how much I love you all right in this very moment."

"You'll heal faster at home, princess. I know you're making the best of it, but you're not happy here. That's going to delay you getting better," Ivan said.

"And you clearly need some real food to make you less cranky," Andrei said, grinning at me.

"I do. That's a real thing. I know you guys would like to go home as well. There's no reason you all should suffer just because I'm suffering," I said.

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"Seph, we're not going anywhere without you. You know that. This was probably the best hospital stay we've ever had, if I'm being honest. You make everything better," Stephen said, his sweet smile stretched across his face.

The nurse came in to fetch me for the x-rays. Andrei and Misha got up to help me out of bed, which surprised the nurse. "Oh, that's handy," she said.

"Perks of being a princess," I said. They all laughed, but she couldn't tell that I wasn't serious. I didn't bother to elaborate, either. I really am cranky.

Adrik stayed beside me, offering his arm for me to lean on as we walked slowly to the elevator. The guys insisted on coming with us, as well, but stayed outside the x-ray room. Dr. Williams was there to take the x- rays of my lung to make sure there was no extra fluid after removing the chest tube. "Okay, so this is going to be uncomfortable because I have to move your arm, but I'll be as quick as possible. I need you to lay on the table. It'll give more support for your shoulder once I take it out of the sling," he said. Adrik picked me up without a word and gently set me on the table. He helped me lay down slowly before moving out of the way so Dr. Williams could put me in the correct position for the x-ray.

When he released my arm from the sling and moved it away from my body, I had shooting pains in my shoulder, down to my hip. I wanted to scream, but I wanted to go home more, so I somehow managed to hold it in. When Dr. Williams walked away there were tears streaming down my face. I held still while he took the x- rays. Adrik walked to the table after Dr. Williams was done, before he walked back out, and wiped the tears from my face gently. He looked pained. He said, in Russian, "I felt that too. I know how much pain you're in." Dr. Williams came back to strap my arm in the sling once again. As soon as he moved it again, more shooting pain in my shoulder. This time, I heard Adrik inhale sharply. I was expecting it this time, so I was more prepared, but it didn't hurt any less. Once Dr. Williams was done, Adrik picked me up, the pained look still on his face. "I'm sorry," I said quietly in Russian. "I didn't mean to share that with you."

"What did I tell you about apologizing to me?" he said, carrying me out of the room. "I love you. All of you. All the time."

"I'll have the x-rays in a few minutes," Dr. Williams called after us. The guys looked worried when Adrik carried me out.

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Chapter Two Hundred Ninety-Three

Sephie

“What happened?” Ivan asked, clearly bristled.

“He had to move her arm. She’s in severe pain. I don’t know how she’s been handling it. It would’ve cr*ppled me,” Adrik said, still in Russian.

“You can feel her pain now too?” Stephen asked.

“This was the first time,” Adrik said as we got on the elevator to go back to my hospital room. “When he moved her arm, it was a severe shooting pain in my shoulder down to my hip.”

“That’s exactly what I felt,” I said, chewing on my bottom lip. I hadn’t been able to feel Adrik as strongly since I’d been in pain. It was like the pain was overtaking everything. When I was still paralyzed from whatever sedation they’d given me, I couldn’t feel as much pain, so I could feel him more strongly. Ivan, too. I just couldn’t do anything about it because I couldn’t move my own body.

“What’s your pain level now, princess?” Ivan asked.

“She’s definitely at a 13. Don’t let her lie to you,” Adrik said. “She can take her next dose of superprofen soon, but not soon enough.” He looked down at me. “Are you sure you don’t want to try something stronger now that you’re going home?”

“I can manage. Ivan was right. It’ll be better once I get home and can sleep for more than 2 hours at a time,” I said.

“I can have the acupuncturist come to the penthouse today. It’ll help with pain. At least that’s what they tell me,” Ivan said, winking at me. I smiled back at him, nodding my head.

“Do it. I want to get her home as soon as possible,” Adrik said.

Dr. Williams came to the hospital room shortly after we returned. “Your lung looks good. The blood that was there was completely drained with your chest tube, so you don’t need to worry about blood clots. Your ribs have stayed in place, as well. It actually helps that your arm is secured to your waist. It provides a layer of protection and stability for your ribs right now. I see no reason to keep you here any longer,” he said. Like you had a choice, doc.

I tried to smile as sweetly as possible at him, but I was still in pain. “Thanks, doc,” I said.

“I’ll have a nurse bring a chair so you can leave,” he said.

“Save her the trip. I don’t need it,” I said. He started to argue with me, but I just looked at him, then looked at all the guys standing around me. “You really think they’d let me leave here in a wheelchair? They’d be more likely to fight over who gets to carry me out of here. Let’s not be dumb, doc.”

His expression was one of amusement and embarrassment. “Right. Come back in two weeks so I can check the progress of your shoulder and arm. I’ll have the nurse bring you sleeve for your cast so you can shower. Keep the sling on as much as possible. Only out of it for a shower and that’s it. Your shoulder was completely out of socket. You need to keep it immobile for a few weeks to let the soft tissue heal,” he said, leaving the room.

Viktor and Stephen went to pull the vehicles around so we could leave. I had to admit that even though I was still in pain, I was suddenly very happy to be leaving.

“It’s too early for Vinny’s, but there will be a real breakfast for us soon after we get home,” Viktor said as Adrik helped me into the backseat.

“Viktor, have I mentioned how much I love you lately?” I said, catching his eye in the rear-view mirror. Even though I could only see part of his face, I could tell that I’d just made him melt.

I felt a sense of relief wash over me once we walked into the penthouse. It was nice to be home. Anywhere with Adrik felt like home, but this penthouse and the house, they both felt like they were just as much my space now as Adrik’s. I smiled to myself thinking about how happy I was to be home again.

As soon as we walked into the penthouse, Andrei walked to the kitchen to make coffee. “We haven’t had good coffee in so long. It’s been so long, spider monkey,” he said dramatically.

Adrik checked his watch. “That works out well. You can take your superprofen. The caffeine will help it take effect quicker.”

Viktor’s phone beeped. “Food is here. I’ll be right back,” he said.

“I’m so happy right now,” I said. My stomach growled loudly, just for emphasis.

We were quieter than usual as everyone ate and guzzled as much good coffee as humanly possible. I knew the guys were at a clear disadvantage since I could basically sleep whenever I wanted to, but they needed to get back to work. They were going to need all the coffee today.

“How’s Dario?” I asked, still slowly finished my food. Breathing was still laborious, so everything I did was much slower than usual.

“The guards on him say he’s been quiet, but that he seems happy. He’s always grateful when they give him. anything. He says to thank Boss all the time. He’s been asking if he can have an update occasionally. I think he wants to know when he can leave,” Viktor said.

“I would like to know how he knew about Armando’s first wife. And why he didn’t tell anybody that Sal was trafficking girls,” I said.

“We can talk to him again soon. I don’t like the thought of bringing him out during the day. He’s well-hidden and I’d like to keep it that way. I don’t want Armando to see that we have Dario. Yet,” Adrik said. “I’d like to have another discussion with Armando before he sees Dario.”

“And by ‘discussion’ you mean you’re going to make him wish he jumped off the roof when I told him to?” I said. I couldn’t help but feel some satisfaction at that thought.

“To put it mildly, yes,” Adrik said, a small smile on his lips.

“Okay, well, don’t hurt your knuckles too much. I’m in no shape to take care of you very well right now. Only one of us is allowed to be hurt at a time,” I said. When he looked at me, I felt that pull in my chest that he gets when he thinks about how much he loves me. I winked at him. “Do you think he’ll tell you anymore about Ricardo?” I asked.

“We’ll see. I’m curious to see how he reacts. I think he’ll be different with me than he was with you. He clearly thought he had the upper hand with you, although it still stuns me that he thought he was smarter than you. He’s always pretended to defer to me. Never once argued with anything I’ve told him. I don’t know if that was an act or if there’s legitimate fear there, but I intend to find out,” Adrik said.

“I love a good mystery,” I said, putting the last bite of bacon in my mouth.

Ivan’s phone beeped. He took it out, looking at the text. “The acupuncturist can be here this afternoon, princess.”

“Good. Did you tell her you need it too?” I asked.

“I did not,” he said. “I’m fine. You took the worst of it this time.”

“Fine. I will tell her then,” I said. I wasn’t angry with him, but I wanted to mess with him just to see what would happen. He started to argue with me, but I looked at him, trying to make my eyes go as dark as possible. I wasn’t sure how to do it, but since he’d told me they changed so quickly in the hospital, I wanted to see if I could control when it happened. The look on his face told me I was getting control of it. I didn’t let him suffer for very long before I laughed weakly at him and tried to change them back to normal.

“You were trying to control it that time, weren’t you?” Ivan asked. I nodded my head, still smiling at him. “That’s impressive. It worked.”

I suddenly felt Adrik’s desire for me come on very strongly. I could tell he was trying to hold it back, because I was in no shape for, well, anything, but I knew he was thinking about me changing my eyes the next time we had s*x. I felt my cheeks flush.

“Do you have enough energy for a shower, solnishko?” Adrik asked. He sounded innocent enough, but I knew he was struggling to hold it together in front of everyone.

“I think so. But that means I’ll probably sleep for like four hours after. Everything is exhausting right now,” I said, trying to hide the grin I knew was growing on my face.

“Let’s get you cleaned up, then you can sleep until your acupuncture,” he said. He looked at the guys. “You guys should get cleaned up as well. Come back when you’re done. I want to see what else we can find on Ricardo and Lorenzo before tonight.”

Everyone’s head nodded in agreement. They set about cleaning up the kitchen as Adrik picked me up, carrying me to bedroom. Once the door was closed, I grinned at him. “You’re so excited for my new trick, aren’t you?”

He exhaled loudly. “You have no idea, solnishko.”

Chapter Two Hundred Ninety-Four

Sephie

The shower was much more painful than I was hoping because of my arm being out of the sling. I tried to hold it against me as much as I could, which helped, but I was glad I had Adrik to help me. It was so painful I ended up in tears by the end of the shower. I was trying to hold everything in, so I didn't push any of the pain to him. While I really enjoyed sharing everything else with him, sharing my pain with him didn't seem fair.

As he was helping me get dressed before putting my arm back in the sling, he had a smirk on his face. "What are you not telling me?" I asked, watching him.

"The more you try to hold everything in, the easier it is for me to feel it. I know you're trying to avoid pushing your pain on to me, but the more you fight letting it go, the easier it is for me to feel. I know how excruciating that shower was for you just now," he said. I was still only in a bra and panties. He had my sling in his hand as he stood in front of me. He gently moved my still wet hair from my face and leaned down to press his lips to

mine.

"D*mmit," I said. "That did not go how I planned."

He laughed as he started to wrap the sling around my waist. "I did warn you before, you know," he said, dramatically, mimicking Misha. "It's not fair that you only share the good parts with me. Now I can hold you to that." He looked extra proud of himself at being able to get around my weak defense system.

For just a moment, my pain subsided and the warmth that I normally feel when thinking about him spread through my body. He felt it too, looking at me somewhat surprised as he strapped my arm back into the sling. "I didn't realize how much I would miss that feeling," he said, as he stepped closer to me. He put both hands gently on either side of my face and leaned down to kiss me. Where he had been extra gentle in the hospital, like he was afraid to hurt me, he let himself go slightly. The kiss started gentle, but he sucked my bottom lip in between his, his teeth grazing my lip. The pain in my body retreated once again and I could feel nothing but him. The warm sensation traveling over my entire body was met with the pull in my chest toward him as he deepened the kiss, his tongue exploring my mouth gently. I held onto his arm that was still holding my face like he was worried I would break, moaning softly. It felt amazing to have a pain-free moment.

When he stopped the kiss, I kept my eyes closed. The pain was still gone. I was worried that if I opened my eyes, it would come crashing back. I heard him laugh quietly. "Are you okay, solnishko?"

I finally opened my eyes slowly. "You took all the pain away just now. How did you do that?" I asked quietly.

"It worked?" he asked, surprised.

"Yeah, it's coming back slowly, but not as fast as I thought it would. What did

you do?"

"I remembered when you were hurt after the ball, you told me that when we had s*x it made your pain go away. I don't think you're in any shape for that much right now, but that doesn't mean I can't think about it," he said, his devilish grin on his face.

"Devious. I like it. I'll allow it," I said, smiling widely at him. He had moved to pick up my leggings and stopped

when he saw my smile.

"I should do that more. Your light just got brighter again," he said.

"Yes, please."

Adrik

As soon as I took Sephie's arm out of the sling, I felt the shooting pain in my left shoulder that she felt when her arm was no longer supported. It shot all the way down to my hip again, just like it did in the hospital. I could tell she was trying to hide it, as she didn't make a sound, but I could feel it just as strongly as I'd ever felt anything from her. She held onto her left arm with her right the entire shower, trying to give her shoulder some relief. I tried to be quick in the shower, but her long hair made that difficult.

After the shower, I helped her with her bra and panties, her pain level still at an inhuman level. She hadn't realized yet that I could feel it. The more she tried to hide it from me, the more I could feel it. It was almost a game to me now. She saw me smirking at her, asking what I wasn't telling her.

"The more you try to hold everything in, the easier it is for me to feel it. I know you're trying to avoid pushing your pain on to me, but the more you fight letting it go, the easier it is for me to feel. I know how excruciating that shower was for you just now," I said. Her eyes went wide as she realized that her feeble attempt to block me had failed. That was a new one for me. She'd been able to hide her pain both times she'd been seriously hurt before. I was still a little angry with her over it. No matter how many times I told her that I wanted her to come to me, her default was still to try and hide it and take care of herself, rather than feeling like she was burdening me with anything more. Now she couldn't hide and I, for one, was very happy about it.

"D*mmit," she said. "That did not go how I planned."

I just laughed at her as I started to wrap the sling around her waist. "I did warn you before, you know," I said, trying to mimic Misha's penchant for the dramatic. "It's not fair that you only share the good parts with me. Now I can hold you to that." I looked at her, quite proud of this latest development. I wanted to be able to take care of her and to know what she needed the same way she did for me.

She stood in front of me, still in her bra and panties, still slightly surprised, but half-grinning at what I was sure was a goofy grin on my face. I suddenly got hit with the warmth that she felt when she thought about how much she loved me. I didn't realize how much I'd been missing that feeling. It was so different to the pull that I felt in my chest when I thought about her, but it was so her. She radiated love, especially for me. The warmth that she felt was a physical manifestation of that. When she would push that feeling to me, it wasn't the feeling of being loved. It wasn't a knowing that she loved me. It was love. She is love.

"I didn't realize how much I would miss that feeling," I said as I took a step toward her. I wanted to pull her to me, but I knew she was still in so much pain that wasn't a good idea. I could still feel her pain, but it was in the background now. The warmth was the dominant feeling. I wanted to make it last for her. I remembered when we were in Italy that she had told me that anytime we had s*x, the pain would subside completely. It didn't take any effort on my part to think about what I wanted to do to her when she was healed. I took her face in my hands and pressed my lips to hers, thinking about feeling her, about what she made me feel. It was difficult to hold myself back, but I kissed her with more passion than I had at the hospital. I sucked on her bottom lip, which I knew she loved. I felt her reach up with her good arm and hold onto my forearm. She felt

like the pain was lessening and her desire was getting stronger, but I wasn't completely sure it worked. The

pain was still there, but it was not as loud. She leaned into me, moaning softly. Before I lost complete control, I stepped back from her. I didn't want to hurt her. She still had her eyes closed when I looked down at her. She kept them closed for a moment. Longer than I thought she would. "Are you okay, solnishko?" I asked, a little worried that something was wrong.

She slowly opened her eyes, almost like she was afraid to. "You took all the pain away just now. How did you do that?"

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Chapter 295

Chapter Two Hundred Ninety-Five

Adrik

“It worked?” I was a little surprised my idea had worked.

“Yeah, it’s coming back slowly, but not as fast as I thought it would. What did you do?”

“I remembered when you were hurt after the ball, you told me that when we had s*x it made your pain go away. I don’t think you’re in any shape for that much right now, but that doesn’t mean I can’t think about it,” I said.

She cut her eyes up at me, a small grin on her face that made her look s*xy as hell. “Devious. I like it. I’ll allow it,” she said. She gave me her smile that made my heart threaten to stop. I’d definitely missed that.

“I should do that more. Your light just got brighter again,” I said, grabbing her leggings to help her finish getting dressed.

“Yes, please,” she said, walking slowly to the bed so she could sit. Her breathing was still labored, especially when she got tired. She took as deep a breath as she was able to while I helped her with her leggings. “I didn’t know I would miss being able to feel you. I didn’t know it would go away,” she said quietly.

“I don’t think it went away, solnishko. I think it was just drowned out by your pain. I’m still shocked that you’re able to function with the pain levels you’re dealing with right now. I wouldn’t be able to move,” I said.

“Ivan told me that redheads have an insanely high pain tolerance. Apparently he was right,” she said.

“How does he know that?” I asked, going to the closet to grab another one of my hoodies for her and clothes for me.

She waited until I came back to answer. She still couldn’t talk very loudly. “I don’t want to tell more than he wants me to. He said that there were a few redhead boys where he was experimented on when he was a kid. He said he felt worse for them than he did himself, which is saying quite a lot. They tortured Ivan,” she said.

“Ivan hasn’t told me everything. I think you’re the only one he’s ever told everything to. He doesn’t need to. Whatever it was, it shaped him into the man he is today, like you told the nurse. That’s all I need to know,” I said.

She looked at me, very seriously and slowly pointed her finger at me. “That’s exactly the kind of thing a witch would say,” she said, trying to hold in her laughter.

“That reminds me. How can you feel Ivan now?” I asked, curious.

“It’s very different and it’s definitely not as strong as what I feel with you, but he has his own energy signature. I was starting to feel him when we were grabbed. Like, I could tell when he was getting angry without having to see him. It seems like anger is the easiest one for me to feel. When they took me from the room to Armando, I felt him lose it before he made a move to try and protect me.” I sat on the bed next to her. She chewed on her bottom lip, stopping to catch her breath. “When you’re protective of me, it feels like you’re right there with me. Like you’re standing beside me, but your presence is all that’s needed to scare whatever is threatening me away. That’s what it felt like when you pulled me from my nightmare into the darkness. It felt like you were with me, showing me how to command the darkness.” She looked at me, again catching her breath. “With Ivan, it’s completely different. He puts me in a bubble.” I laughed at her description. “I know, sounds weird, but I don’t know how else to describe it. But that’s what it feels like. When the doctor was doing whatever it was to make Ivan feel like he needed to protect me, it felt like I was in a bubble and the doctor could no longer see me. I could still feel you and I could feel Ivan standing guard, basically, but I felt nothing else. Everyone else was gone and I couldn’t hear anyone talking until the doctor left the room.”

“What about Misha? Can you feel him the same way now that you unlocked a new level for him?”

She thought for a minute. “Not exactly. I could tell who was moving me before I woke up, but I don’t know if that’s the same. I knew it was Andrei and Stephen that moved me so you could get in bed with me when I started shaking,” she said.

“How did you know it was them?”

“Andrei’s warmer than average and I’d know Stephen’s undead hands anywhere,” she said, smiling. “I haven’t noticed being able to feel anything extra with Misha yet, but he’s probably the next one.”

I brushed a still damp curl back from her face, kissing her temple. “You never cease to amaze me.”

Sephie was clearly tired after the shower and getting dressed, but she didn’t want to sleep. At least not in the bed. “You told the guys to come back up here so you’re going back out there and I don’t trust my body to not start shaking if I fall asleep without you here yet,” she said.

“Fair enough,” I said, quite happy I didn’t have to be apart from her for any length of time.

“Besides, I want snacks,” she said, grinning at me.

“Then snacks you shall have,” I said, opening the door for her to walk back to the kitchen.

She walked straight to the refrigerator, at her slow pace, and rummaged through until she found something to eat.

“You’re hungry again already, spider monkey?” Andrei said as he walked into the kitchen from downstairs, catching her eating again.

“I didn’t eat for like two days. I have catching up to do. Leave me alone,” she said, turning so he couldn’t see her, but I could. She grinned at me, hoping she was making Andrei worried.

“You clearly still have catching up to do. You’re still cranky,” he said. “We’re going to have to get you two sandwiches from Vinny’s for lunch.”

“That marriage proposal is still on the table, Bubba,” she said, turning back to him so she could see his reaction. His cheeks flushed, which made her want to laugh, but she was still trying to hold it in.

The other guys came to the penthouse shortly after Andrei. Viktor, Ivan, and Stephen had brought their computers to try and find more information on Ricardo and Lorenzo.

“You’re still awake, princess,” Ivan said when he saw her.

“I know, right? Andrei makes a mean cup of coffee,” she said, grinning at Andrei. “It also means you have a short translation window, so let’s get this party started before I pass out again.” Stephen and Viktor both set their computers in front of her. “If I haven’t told you lately, your productivity is admirable,” she said, looking over one of the computers as she finished her snack.

Stephen had been looking up information on Armando before he took over as boss of his area of the city. Viktor had been concentrating on Ricardo and Ivan had been looking up information on Lorenzo while Sephie was in the hospital.

“Hmmm. This one is about Armando. It’s old. I’m guessing it’s from before he became boss. Huh. He was arrested in Italy.” She kept reading, but she stopped translating. Her eyes got wider as she continued reading. She finally looked up at all of us. “According to this, Armando isn’t from a wealthy family like he told everyone. He was a poor kid in Italy. He got arrested for petty crimes several times as a kid before getting arrested for murder when he was 16.”

“Do we know for sure it’s the same Armando?” Stephen asked.

She turned the computer around to show us a picture of a much younger Armando, but it was clearly the same man that was going to face a slow, painful death downstairs. “Same guy. His face is now permanently etched into my brain, unfortunately. There’s no getting rid of his face now,” she said. I walked closer to her, trying to provide some comfort, as well as trying to keep my own anger in check.

“So, now the question is what family is he pretending to be from?” Viktor asked.

“I’ve always known him as Armando Petrucci,” I said.

“The Armando in this article is Armando Rossi,” Sephie said. Stephen took his computer back to start a new search, so she moved to the next computer. “This one is about Ricardo,” she said as she scanned the article. “It’s more about the boats they found loaded with people. Holy sh*t, this journalist called him out as a human trafficker. See if you can find more articles from this particular journalist,” she said as she slid the computer back toward Viktor.

Ivan was still looking through his search. I put my hands gently on her hips and turned her to face me. I was worried she would be getting tired, but trying to push through because the guys needed her to translate. She looked at me, smiling sweetly, already knowing what I was thinking. “I’m okay for now. The couches might be better though, so I can sit against you. I’m cold again,” she smiled sheepishly at me.

“Wait here. I can fix that,” I said. I leaned down and kissed her gently, then walked quickly to one of the spare rooms, taking the blanket off the bed. Her eyes lit up when I walked back down the hallway.

“I’m about to be so warm. I’m so excited for this development in my life,” she said as she walked to the couches as quickly as she was able. Andrei and Misha followed her to help her sit while Viktor, Ivan, and Stephen gathered up their computers and moved to the couches as well. She leaned back against me and pulled the blanket around her shoulders.

“You’re not going to stay awake for long now,” I said, my fingers lightly running through her hair and over her neck.

“Not if you keep doing that,” she said, leaning her head back to smile at me. Ivan walked over and placed his computer in her lap.

Chapter Two Hundred Ninety-Six

Adrik

“Before you fall asleep again, princess,” he said, grinning at her. She looked over what was on the screen, scanning the article. She got halfway through, then scrolled back up to the top. “This is the same journalist that wrote about Ricardo and called him a human trafficker. We should check to see if he’s even still alive. He seems to be right on the money about Lorenzo and Ricardo, which can’t be good for his life expectancy,” she said as she scrolled back through the article again. “The journalist is still trying to prove his theory about Ricardo, so he looked up information on Lorenzo and found his ties to the business, most notably to the other bosses in the city.” She scanned all the way to the bottom of the article, then leaned her head back to look at me and added, “no mention of your father or of you though.”

“Good. My father worked just as hard as I do to stay anonymous, at least when it came to press and business. If that journalist would’ve mentioned my father, I could’ve told you for certain that he was no longer alive,” I said.

Viktor got up and switched his computer with Ivan’s in Sephie’s lap. “This is the journalist, right?” he asked her.

“Oh. Sh*t. Yeah. He dead,” she said. “I’m finding there’s a theme of exploding buildings in this business, for various reasons.”

Ivan chuckled at her. “That doesn’t mean he’s dead then, princess. Even if they supposedly found his body. Fires and explosions are the easiest way to fake your own death.”

She looked at him for a moment. “I stand corrected. And also, I want to know how you know this and yet, I don’t.” She thought for a minute. “Can you find out if he’s really dead or not?”

“We likely could, but it’ll take time. At this point, we already know most of what he’s saying,” Viktor said.

“Unless he uncovered something bigger and that’s why he needed to disappear,” she said.

“Fair point,” Viktor said, taking his computer back. They spent the next few minutes on new searches. I went back to running my fingers through her hair and along her neck while we waited. I was fairly certain she would fall asleep before they found the next article for her to translate. The longer she was in my lap, the warmer she- felt, and the more she relaxed. I shifted slightly and she didn’t move. I caught Andrei’s eye and pointed to her, silently asking if she was asleep.

“Completely out,” he said quietly.

“I knew she was fighting it,” I said, laughing quietly.

“How’s her pain been since we got home?” Ivan asked.

“The shower was excruciating for her. Anytime her arm is out of the sling means horrible pain for her. She tries to hide it, like she’s done in the past, but apparently, that now makes it easier for me to feel it. I don’t know what changed, but I felt everything she felt in that shower, no matter how hard she tried to hide it and act like she was fine,” I said. I was still somewhat frustrated with her trying to hide her pain from me and Ivan heard it in my voice.

“Don’t be mad at her for that. It’s a trauma response. She can’t help it. Until we came along, everyone in her life to that point, had let her down especially when she was at her weakest. When she did ask for help, it got her uterus taken from her. It’s going to take time for her to learn that she’s safe enough to ask for help. regularly,” he said. I thought for a moment, taking a deep breath in which made her move her good arm to find my hand under the blanket. She sighed quietly in her sleep, like she was agreeing with everything Ivan had just said. “See, she knows she can’t argue with me on that one either,” he said, laughing quietly. “The more you can feel that she needs help and give it to her without her asking, the more you’ll reinforce that she’s safe enough to do so on her own. I think your ability to feel her pain now is helping her heal that part of her that still doesn’t feel 100% safe. She says she feels safe with all of us, and that’s true, but there’s still that part of her deep inside that doesn’t when she’s hurt.”

“I think I should make Ivan a vampire too, so he can have enough time to heal the world,” Stephen said without looking up from his computer.

Sephie slept until lunchtime. The guys waited to get Vinny’s until it was closer to the time that the acupuncturist would be there, so Sephie could wake up and eat, then have her acupuncture soon after and didn’t have to try and stay awake again. Andrei also made sure that they ordered two sandwiches for Sephie. “She can eat it later, since she’s hungry every three hours right now,” he said.

I gently tried to wake her up as Misha ran downstairs to get the food. She started to stir and went to turn toward me, immediately regretting it. “SON OF A M*THERFUCKING W*ORE HOW DID I FORGET I COULDN’T DO THAT,” she yelled. At least she’s awake now.

I couldn’t help but laugh at her response, even though I knew it caused her pain. “I’ll make sure and hold you. down when I wake you up next time,” I said, kissing her temple. She just groaned quietly, holding her arm and ribs.

Andrei walked over to help her get up. “We got Vinny’s, spider monkey. And the acupuncturist will be here soon,” he said, holding out his hand to help her up. “I got you two sandwiches, too. Since your metabolism seems to be working overtime right now,” he said, grinning at her.

“Bubba,” she said, as she used his arm to help herself sit more upright, “I just need you to marry me already. Seriously. How long can a girl wait.” He looked at me, somewhat nervous at my reaction, but I found it funny. She tried not to laugh when she saw his face. He relaxed a little when he saw I was amused by it. He leaned down and picked her up off the couch, helping her stand up. She looked back at the blanket, saying, “I’m bringing that thing with me. That’s the first time I’ve been warm in like three days.” I stood up from the couch and wrapped the blanket around her. Misha had returned and was genuinely trying not to laugh at her walking. around like a child with her blanket on. “Oh, you can laugh. I don’t care. I’m warm,” she said, sticking her tongue out at him.

Since she was awake again, she worked on translating information that they’d found while she was sleeping. As she was reading one article, Viktor’s computer beeped. “Papa Bear, do you regularly get emails in Italian?” she asked.

“Uh, no. Never. Did I just get one?”

“Mmm hmm. Should I open it?”

“Sure. If it’s a virus, I’ll deal with it,” he said. She opened the email and read through it, her eyes getting wider the more she read.

“Holy sh*t, he not dead,” she said.

“Who? The journalist?” we all asked at once.

“I mean, unless it’s the ghost of the journalist, he just emailed you. He said he monitors the articles you’ve been looking up to see if anyone is looking into Ricardo and Lorenzo. He said he’s still been watching them and he has more information on them. He also said he’s in hiding and you’ll never find him if you try looking any harder,” she said.

“Well, that’s an unexpected development,” Ivan said.

“I want to know what else he knows about them,” she said. “Should I respond?”

“Tell him that we know what he knows already,” Ivan said. Sephie looked at him, somewhat confused. “But we don’t,” she said.

“He doesn’t know that and most of the time if you tell a journalist that you know more than they do about something, it p*sses them off and makes them prove they know more than you,” Ivan said.

Sephie started to type a response, with just her right hand. She glanced up to see us all watching her type with only one hand, clearly more amused than we should’ve been about it. “Don’t mind me. I’ll have this done by the end of the week,” she said as she continued pecking at the keys as quickly as she could. Just as she got the email finished, Ivan’s phone beeped to let him know the acupuncturist was in the lobby.

“I’ll be right back, princess,” he said, walking out of the penthouse.

Sephie continued to read through what Viktor had found while she’d been sleeping while she waited for Ivan to return. She glanced up at Viktor, “didn’t you say that Armando and Ricardo were related, albeit distantly?”

“That’s what the records I found showed, but I’m not sure that’s entirely accurate now,” he said.

“There has to be a reason that Armando chose to use the family name he did,” she said. Ivan walked back into. the penthouse with the acupuncturist. Viktor pulled his computer back toward him, saying, “I’ll see what I can find while you’re getting tuned up.” The acupuncturist looked at Sephie, then looked at Ivan, her eyes wide for just a moment. “I know. So many people wish they could look this good and they simply can’t,” Sephie said, sarcastically.

“See, I told you,” Ivan said to the acupuncturist, who was laughing at Sephie. She walked to the spare room that she usually worked on Sephie in, waiting for Sephie to slowly follow her. Ivan and I followed as well, to help her lie down more easily.

Once the door was closed, she looked to Ivan. “You need it, too.”

Sephie pointed at him, “told you.”

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 297

Chapter Two Hundred Ninety-Seven

Adrik

The acupuncturist said, “last time, Ivan took the worst of it to save Sephie. This time, Sephie took the worst of it to save Ivan.”

Ivan immediately took offense and started to argue, but she put her hand up, cutting him off. She walked to Sephie, taking her hand like she always did. She closed her eyes while pressing on the spot just between her thumb and forefinger. She shook her head no, then walked to Ivan doing the same thing. “They were going to kill you, Ivan. Sephie made sure that didn’t happen.”

Sephie was somewhat surprised. “I didn’t do anything. Other than run my mouth.”

“You kept the focus on you, Sephie. If Ivan had done that, they would’ve killed him. They needed you. They didn’t need him. You might not have been completely aware of that, but your soul knew. You listened,” she said, smiling sweetly at Sephie, who now had stray tears falling down her cheeks.

Ivan wrapped his giant arm gently around her shoulders, kissing the top of her head. They just stood there for a moment, until the acupuncturist asked another question. “You can feel him now, the same way you can feel your boyfriend, can’t you?”

Sephie nodded, wiping her eyes. “It’s not as strong and it’s different, but I can feel him sometimes now.”

“You’ll be able to feel all of them soon. Especially the one that can see the unseen,” she said. Misha.

“But how though?” Sephie asked.

The acupuncturist smiled at her. “You still don’t realize your potential, Sephie. You’re not like other women. They’re not like other men, for that matter.” She left it at that and motioned for Sephie to lie down. Ivan and I both helped her. She looked at me, then to Ivan. “I need to see under her clothes.”

6

“Ivan’s already seen it. I don’t care, as long as he doesn’t care,” Sephie said, looking at me. I nodded once. The acupuncturist helped Sephie lift the hoodie over her head and pull her leggings off. Her body was still badly bruised, but the bruises were just starting to changing colors. Fading from a bright blue and purple to a greenish brown in spots, which meant they were already in the beginning stages of healing. She put her hands on Sephie, much like the doctor did, to check for internal damage. I glanced at Ivan, who was looking at Sephie’s bruises in an entirely new light. He looked both shocked and apologetic. He looked to me with a very obvious “I didn’t mean for this to happen” look on his face.

“You can stop worrying, Super Squish. I’m going to live,” Sephie said, without looking at him. She’d closed her eyes as soon as the acupuncturist put her hands on her. I couldn’t help but smile at Ivan, who was also smiling at Sephie and shaking his head.

“I’m not sure how I feel about this,” Ivan said, laughing quietly.

I could feel the relief that Sephie got when the acupuncture needles were in for just a short time. Her shoulder and her ribs were still causing her extreme pain. Sephie, however, wasn’t saying anything about it. “Her shoulder and her left ribs are still in extreme pain,” I told the acupuncturist. She nodded her head. “I’m saving that for last. It’s going to hurt for a minute before it feels better, so I need the rest of her body to feel better first. That way, it’s not as bad.”

She motioned for Ivan to sit in a chair close to the bed where Sephie was. “Take your shirt off,” she said. “Your upper body is what always takes everything. This time was no different.” She got busy sticking needles in him while Sephie’s body worked on self-correcting as much as possible. I could feel her relax more, with each minute, as the pain in her body subsided slowly. I could still feel her shoulder and her ribs, but it felt like the pain was staying localized in that area, instead of her entire body with an extra emphasis on her shoulder and ribs.

I hadn’t noticed the acupuncturist watching me watch Sephie, until she said quietly, “you can feel her pain now, no? It’s stronger than other emotions you’ve been able to feel?” I nodded my head. Of course she would know that. “Because that’s where she needs the most help. Your anger is strongest because that’s where you need the most help. Her pain is strongest because she needs the most help there, but she won’t ask for it.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “Ivan just told me that a few hours ago.” I looked to Ivan, who had his eyes closed like he was asleep. Just like Sephie. Neither one of them seemed to be aware of our conversation.

“They can’t hear us right now,” she said, a small smile on her face. “She’s afraid to be completely vulnerable. She’s almost there, but in her past, showing weakness or asking for help while she was hurt got her hurt more. I don’t know details, of course, and I don’t need to know details. Her soul is asking yours to help her heal by letting you feel her pain when she tries to hide it. She needs to understand that she’s going to be taken care of when she’s hurt. She’s close to knowing that, but there’s still a part of her that remembers when she had no one to count on.”

“How? She’s very stubborn and she has a very understandable mistrust of doctors.”

“She doesn’t need doctors. She needs you. She needs Ivan. And she needs the other four waiting outside. You’re all together for a very specific reason. You might think that she’s helping all of you level up in this lifetime, but by her helping you, you’re helping her do the same. You’re both much stronger than the last time I saw you, despite her injuries. The others are starting to believe how special she is, aren’t they?” I nodded my head. “Good. That’s the first step. If they can see it in her, they can see it in themselves.”

“I’m not sure I understand. I know Misha has a gift, but I don’t think the other three do?”

“Not yet. You and Sephie and Ivan are older than the other four. The one who can see the unseen is older than the other three, but not as old as you. Your job is to help them discover their gifts. In turn, they’ll help you take care of what needs to be taken care of in this lifetime,” she said, as she turned back to Ivan and Sephie. As soon as she stepped away from me, I noticed that Sephie and Ivan were talking to each other like there was nobody else in the room. The acupuncturist turned to look at me before beginning to remove the needles from Ivan and winked. That was strange.

I walked to Sephie, who still had the needles in. She already felt lighter again. She heard my footsteps and opened her eyes when I got closer to the bed. “You look better already,” I said.

“You can feel it too, can’t you?” she asked.

“Maybe a little,” I said, grinning at her. She smiled her gorgeous smile at me, making my heart threaten to stop. She picked her head up and looked at Ivan. “He feels better, too. There’s less background noise to him,” she said.

DIA

-Seven

He laughed, putting his shirt back on. “If ever there was an accurate description of what it’s like in my head sometimes, that’s it.”

The acupuncturist pulled the needles from Sephie. She looked at me. “She’s going to need you for this,” she said. She looked at Sephie as I walked to her right side, to grab her hand. “This is going to be extremely painful at first, Sephie, but I want you to let him help you with it. He’s just as strong as you are. He can take it,” she said. Sephie looked confused and started to ask a question when the acupuncturist stuck the first needle in her shoulder.

“OH F**K ME” she yelled. I could feel a sharp pain in my left shoulder, holding my breath to try and withstand the pain. The acupuncturist looked at me like she was silently giving me instructions and her words from earlier popped in my head. “She needs you.” I focused on trying to take her pain and turn it into a more pleasurable sensation for her. Much like I did after the shower this morning. I could feel my desire for her rise quickly and I pushed that to her as the acupuncturist stuck the second needle in her shoulder. Sephie didn’t yell this time, but she still whimpered softly. It was still a sharp pain in her shoulder, but it was much less than the first time.

The pain in her shoulder slowly started to lessen as the acupuncturist stuck more needles in it. She stopped, saying, “I need to take your arm out of the sling. It’s going to hurt, but not as much as it has before.” Sephie looked at me, clearly worried about having to move her shoulder again.

Ivan stood up and walked to the bed. “I think I can help,” he said. “The pain comes from feeling the weight of the cast. I can hold it so your shoulder doesn’t have to compensate for the weight of your arm. She can have access that way.”

The acupuncturist caught my eye, a very small smile on her lips. “She needs Ivan.” For the first time, when Sephie’s arm came out of the sling, she didn’t feel a shooting pain down her left side. The acupuncturist worked quickly, reaching around Ivan and Sephie’s cast to put the needles where they needed to go. I expected her ribs to be more painful and just like her shoulder, the first couple of needles were extremely painful, but she handled it well. I felt the relief wash over her after a few minutes. She took the deepest breath she’d taken in days, a smile on her face as she felt her lungs expand completely. I could feel her ribs were still sore, but the sharp pain had subsided for the moment.

Once the needles came out and her arm was back in her sling, I helped her back into her clothes. “She should definitely come back regularly for a while. Your pain level is much lower now,” I said, helping her stand up to finish getting her leggings back on.

“I will not argue with that. I feel almost human again right now,” she said, her wide smile causing the familiar pull in my chest toward her. She pulled my hoodie back over her head, trying to somewhat tame her hair when she pulled it out of the sweatshirt.

“Remind me to ask Viktor to put his braiding knowledge to good use again.” I just smiled at her, standing in front of her, taking in her out of control hair and her light that was now brighter. I leaned down and kissed her deeply, but quickly, as I didn’t trust myself to be able to stop. She giggled at me. “I love you,” she said as we walked out of the spare room.

Chapter Two Hundred Ninety-Eight

Adrik

“So, that sounded extremely painful,” Andrei said as we walked back out from the spare room.

“Only for a minute and only because my shoulder and ribs are in such a poor state at the moment,” Sephie said quietly. “It’s still not like getting stabbed.” She grinned at him, then added, “I assume. I’m happy that I can’t confirm that one.”

Andrei got up, grabbing the blanket she had been using before and wrapped it back around her. “Are you hungry again yet? It’s been at least twenty minutes,” he asked, teasing her.

“Not yet. Ask me again in ten minutes though,” she said, laughing ever so quietly.

“Despite it sounding horrifically painful, you look better,” Andrei said.

“I agree. You don’t look like you’re forcing your smile right now,” Misha said. “She should come back everyday for a while.” The acupuncturist had been scheduling her next session with Ivan, but she’d also been quietly, observing the exchange. As Ivan moved toward the door to the penthouse, she stopped by the couches.

“She needs all of you just as much as she needs me right now. The same for all of you. You need her. You’re all together for a very important reason,” she said, turning to follow Ivan out.

Stephen looked up from his computer as he heard the door close behind them. “Now I see why Ivan has been going to her for years. She’s just as dramatic as he is,” he said.

“She’s also never been wrong,” Sephie said quietly. She walked slowly to Viktor, who looked up from his computer as she got closer, his soft smile that I never saw for anyone other than Sephie on his face. “Papa Bear, would you please help me out with your superb braiding skills?”

“For you? Of course,” he said as he got up from the couch.

“Do you have more you need translated?” she asked as he started to try and tame her unruly hair.

“I do, whenever you feel up to it. The journalist responded again. I haven’t opened it yet,” he said.

“I have a couple things for you to look at, too. I tried to use a translator while you were getting stabbed, but it didn’t work very well. I still have no idea what it says,” Stephen said. “You would think that I would’ve taken the time to learn Italian in my 900 years. You would think that, but you’d be wrong.”

Sephie smiled. “Don’t be outsourcing my job, Yoden the Enabler. I can’t do anything else right now. I’ll go crazy if you take that away from me too.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Stephen said, smiling at her. Viktor finished her hair and tied it, then handed her his computer so she could read the response from the journalist. She walked back to me, wanting to sit in my lap so she could lean against me again.

“I’m cold again,” she said. Misha and Andrei got up to help her sit down and lean against me again. “What would i do without you guys,” she said sweetly as she started reading.

She was quiet for a few minutes, then said, “Ivan was right. He didn’t like it that I told him we already knew what he knew.” She started opening the attachments that he sent with the email. “He proved it, too.” She starting scanning the documents he sent over. Some of them we did know about. Some of them were new to us, but they all solidified the business relationship between Lorenzo and Ricardo.

“Wait, go back to that one,” I said, reading over her shoulder. She clicked back to the document, opening it again. “That’s for an apartment complex in Naples, isn’t it?” I asked her.

She read through it again. “Yes, why?”

“Armando talked to me about this project. He wanted me to go in on it with him, but I wasn’t interested at the time. It was a smaller project than I was looking for when he came to me with it,” I said.

“Looks like he replaced you then,” she said. “Ricardo and Lorenzo are both listed as owners of the project, but I haven’t seen Armando’s name.”

“What if he was trying to get you on the project so you’d be tied to Lorenzo and Ricardo?” Stephen asked. Ivan walked back into the penthouse after escorting the acupuncturist back to the lobby.

“Who did what now?” he asked, taking his place back on the couch with his computer.

“The journalist responded already. You were right. He didn’t like it that we said we knew everything he knew and he proved it. He sent over several documents, one of which is a project that Armando pitched to Adrik previously, but Adrik turned down. But Armando’s name isn’t on this project according to this guy’s records,” Sephie said.

“That’s shady,” Ivan said. “What else does that guy know about?”

“So far, just that Ricardo and Lorenzo have been in business for quite some time,” I said. “I’m starting to wonder why my father banished him instead of just having him killed.”

“It does make you wonder, as Lorenzo didn’t seem like he ever went away after he was banished,” Sephie said. “He just rebuilt his empire elsewhere. Without supervision.”

Sephie ended up sleeping on me for a few hours that afternoon. I could tell she was sleeping better here than she was at the hospital. There was a definite peaceful feeling to her when she fell asleep at the penthouse versus when she was still at the hospital. She was constantly on guard at the hospital.

We continued looking for information while she slept. So far, we’d found that Armando wasn’t at all who he’d always said he was. We’d also found proof that Ricardo and Lorenzo had been in business together for many years and had brought Armando in on quite a few deals over the years, as well as Giana’s father. Sephie replied to the journalist, telling him that we knew everything but one deal and he was going to have to do better if he wanted to impress us. I think having to type that out one-handed is what wore her out, to be honest. It was painstaking for her.

The guys started to get hungry, so Viktor ordered food before we went downstairs to have a talk with Armando. I know Sephie was curious about Dario, too, but I was planning on letting that one wait a day or two. At least until she felt a little better. I didn’t need her for Armando. I did for Dario.

Frankly, I didn’t want her to ever have to see Armando’s face again. I would make sure she never saw him in person. But I wanted to see what information I could get from him first.

When Viktor went down to grab the food, I tried to gently wake Sephie up. This time I held onto her as I woke her up so she wouldn’t try to turn toward me as she was fighting waking up. She started to stir and I felt her hand slide over my arms, finding one of my hands. “Thank you for saving me from myself,” she said, leaning her head all the way back so she could look up at me.

Andrei and Misha stood up to help her get up. “Come on, spider monkey. It’s been hours since you ate last. You were just starting to be less cranky. Let’s not mess that up,” Andrei said, offering her his arm so she could pull herself up.

As we ate, Sephie asked, “are you going to talk to Armando?” I nodded. “What about Dario?”

“He can wait a day or two until you’re feeling better. I don’t want you to ever have to see Armando again, but I need you for Dario,” I said. “You got him to talk more than he would have if you hadn’t been there. I think he feels more comfortable around you.”

“It’s because I don’t look like I want to kill him right out of the gate,” she said, grinning at me.

“Maybe, but you’ve got the demon eyes now. He had to have noticed when we talked to him last. It was obvious,” Stephen said.

“He might’ve noticed, but he probably doesn’t believe his own eyes. People will talk themselves out of quite a bit if they can’t explain it. Just ask the nurse that thinks Sephie is a witch now,” I said.

Sephie grabbed her ribs, but she let herself laugh. The guys all looked at her, waiting for an explanation. She looked at Ivan, her beautiful smile still making the room brighter. “Apparently we’re local celebrities at the hospital,” she said.

“How so?” Ivan asked, his eyebrow raised.

“One of the nurses that came in the middle of the night asked me if I was the girl that stopped the man from killing everyone in the ER. She said the entire hospital had heard about it and there’s rumors going around as to how I stopped you, but nobody can prove anything. They think the most likely explanation is that you were on some new drug that they didn’t know about yet,” she said. Ivan just chuckled and shook his head.

“What did you tell her, gazelle? It’s not like it’s easy to explain to anyone outside this room,” Misha said.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 299

Chapter Two Hundred Ninety-Nine

Adrik

Sephie took as deep a breath as she could manage. It was slightly better since she'd had the acupuncture. "I told her that I didn't have any special powers and that he wasn't a monster, nor was he on drugs. He's one of my favorite people." She stopped like she wasn't going to continue her explanation. I knew she didn't want to embarrass Ivan, but he needed to hear what she said.

"That's not all you said, love," I said, trying to get her to finish. Her cheeks flushed, but she continued, "I told the nurse that everybody has demons, but he has more than most, for good reason. He's been through more. than anyone should have to endure, but I love him for it. I love all his broken parts and pieces because they make up the man that would readily give up his life for mine. Then I told her that I was an anchor for him in the storms of his own psyche and that it wasn't something that science would be able to explain."

"She also told her that science is the death of magic and some things are only explainable by magic," I said. "That's when I knew that nurse now thinks Sephie is a witch, because she just stood there and stared at Sephie for like two minutes then left without a word."

"I should've given her the demon eyes," Sephie said under her breath. Ivan was quiet, like he was still struggling with coming to terms with what the acupuncturist told us earlier and what Sephie had just said. Under normal circumstances, Sephie would've already gone to him, but given that moving hurt her so much right now, she was forced to watch him from across the kitchen.

"Super Squish…" she said to try and get him to look at her. "I meant every word. And whatever happened when they grabbed us I would gladly do again if it means you're still here. This," she said, motioning to her cast and ribs, "is a small price to pay. I would gladly pay it a thousand times for you." I could see Ivan about to c*ack, so I got up to help her up so she could go to him. She stood up, taking a few steps toward him, but he met her halfway. I still was impressed with how gentle he could be given his massive size. She rested her head against his chest, holding him as tightly as she could with one arm. He whispered something to her, which made her laugh quietly, then kissed the top of her head. He walked her back to where she was sitting and helped her sit back down.

"Were they going to kill Ivan?" Misha asked.

"The acupuncturist, who has never been wrong yet and who has no idea what happened, said Sephie took everything this time to save Ivan, just like last time he took everything to save her," I said.

"It makes sense. They needed Sephie. They didn't need Ivan," Stephen said.

"That's exactly what she said," Sephie said. "I still say all I did was run my mouth," she said, grinning at Ivan. He slid his arm around her shoulders, once more kissing the top of her head. When he did, her eyes went wide for a second and she looked up at him. "Do that again," she said..

"Do what again?" he asked.

"What were you just thinking about just now?"

"How I needed to do a better job of protecting you next time," he said quietly.

She looked to me, asking, "did you feel it this time?" I shook my head no, but I knew she was talking about Ivan's bubble. She looked back at Ivan and told him to think the same thoughts again, but to turn up the volume. As he did, I could feel it. Where there had been background noise and I could feel the other four guys. in the kitchen with us, now I couldn't hear anything but Sephie. It was like the other four were gone. It felt. exactly like how Sephie had described earlier. Like Ivan had put us in a bubble and he was standing guard over us. I looked at her and she knew instantly that I was feeling the same thing she was. She looked back to Ivan, her wide smile on her face. "That's the same thing that happened when you stood over me in the hospital because the doctor was being a weirdo," she said. As she talked, Ivan's bubble disappeared and everything returned to normal..

"What new level did you just unlock for him?" Andrei asked.

"When Ivan gets protective of me, it's like he puts me in a bubble. That's what happened in the hospital. I could feel Adrik beside me, I could feel Ivan watching over me, but I couldn't hear or feel any of you or the doctor until I assume the doctor left," she said.

"I do?" Ivan asked. Clearly he wasn't aware he was doing this.

"You do. I felt it this time," I said. "It was like everything but Sephie and you was shut out for me just now."

"I'm still on board with turning him into a vampire. Especially now that I know he's got special powers. Next up on the list, Misha. We're building an army to make Vlad proud," Stephen said, without cracking as much as a hint of a smile. "Those T*rks aren't going to know what hit them."

Sephie was still tired after dinner, which I was happy about. I wanted her to be able to sleep while I was talking to Armando, rather than worrying about anything. I left Andrei and Misha with her, hoping Andrei could keep her warm enough that she would sleep until I got back. I tried to leave Ivan as well, but he said there was no way he wasn't going. There's a time and place for arguing with Ivan. This was neither the time, nor the place.

Before we left, I helped Sephie add a pair of my sweatpants to her attire to help her stay warm while I was downstairs, which gave us a moment alone. "It feels like your pain is slightly better after the acupuncture?" I said, somewhat unsure if I was correct or not.

"Mmm hmm. My shoulder and ribs still hurt, but the rest of me hurts much less," she said.

"Good. Ivan scheduled her to come everyday for a while. Hopefully that will give you some relief," I said, tying my sweatpants tight enough that they would stay up. She had her good hand resting on my shoulder, watching me as I was bent down in front of her. When I stood up, she was smiling at me.

"I know what you're about to do and yet here you are, making sure to dress me so I stay warm while you're gone," she said laughing.

"I would much rather stay with you, but since I can't, I still have to make sure you're taken care of. The rest of it, literally everything else, doesn't matter without you, Sephie," I said. I stepped closer to her, my palm against her cheek. "That feeling of not knowing where you were, or even if you were still alive…I never want to have that feeling again and I will destroy anyone or anything that threatens you." I leaned down and pressed my lips gently to hers. "Armando is both lucky he's still alive and unlucky he's still alive. I would've killed him right then if you hadn't stopped me. If I wouldn't have, Stephen would've finished him. It takes a lot to push that guy to his breaking point, but he was almost as angry as I was. He's unstoppable when he's like that."

She smiled her sweet smile up at me, holding onto my forearm to keep my hand against her cheek. "Ivan told me that Stephen's bloodlust is almost as bad as yours. I'll admit I had a hard time believing it at first. He said that it didn't matter how many men were guarding the building, all it would take was the two of you and there would be no survivors."

"He was right. Viktor, Andrei, and Misha covered the outside of the building in case more people showed up. There wasn't a single guard left alive by the time we got to you and Ivan," I said. As she looked at me, I felt her warmth spreading through my body.

"I knew you would come for me," she said quietly. I leaned down and kissed her again, thinking about how I really wanted to kiss her, about how much she meant to me, and about how I would destroy the entire world to get her back. I could feel her falter, which meant her knees were threatening to give out, so I stopped the kiss. When I stepped back and looked at her, her eyes were as dark as I'd ever seen them. I looked at her for a few moments, wondering how long it would last, and completely turned on by them.

"How did Armando and Sal not sh*t themselves when they saw you like this?" I asked, grinning at her.

"Like you said, I don't think they believed what they were seeing. It's a little weird. I admit that," she said.

"I love all your weird," I said as I leaned down to pick her up to take her back out to Andrei and Misha.

On the way downstairs in the elevator, Ivan said, "I got a call from the jeweler when Sephie was in the hospital. I just couldn't tell you about it because she was always with you. He said her ring is finally ready."

"Good. Now she just needs to heal before I can give it to her," I said. "You keep it until then. I don't want to risk her finding it. She already saw the sketches of it on my desk, but didn't pay much attention to them, thankfully."

"I'll take care of it tomorrow," Ivan said.

Instead of bringing Armando to my office, we left him in the room. I didn't want him to ever know comfort again in the short time he had remaining on this planet. He looked worse than Sephie and Ivan, which made me happy. Armando tried to stay in shape, but he was no fighter. He caused damage to Sephie simply because he was stronger than she was and she was tied up so she couldn't defend herself. He could still only open one eye.

As soon as he saw us walk in, he started lying. "Boss, I don't understand why I'm in here. I was trying to save Sephie," he said.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 300

Chapter Three Hundred

Adrik

“I’m guessing that’s how you got past Sephie. If you believe a lie enough, it appears to everyone else that you’re telling the truth,” Ivan said. “You honestly believe everything you say because you’re too st*pid to know better.”

Armando turned to look at Ivan, a slow smile creeping across his bruised face. “No, I got past her because I was overly nice to her. Damaged ones like her cling to nice. Like they’re trying to prove to themselves that the world isn’t all bad. I could tell she was damaged right away. As soon as Anthony and the other boss’s sons started to treat her like a wh*re, she took it and never said a word. She’d been conditioned.”

Ivan backhanded Armando. “When are you going to learn that she’s not damaged?” he said. His anger clearly. visible.

“She’s damaged. But I bet she’s amazing in bed. Damaged ones always are,” Armando said. This time, it was my fist that connected to his stomach. He coughed, but didn’t stop smiling. “I knew it. That’s my one regret. That I couldn’t f**k her before you got to her. Is it true that redheads are better in bed? I’ve never had a redhead. I always wondered if that was true.”

“You wouldn’t have been able to sleep with her regardless of whether I showed back up or not,” I said. I knew he was trying to provoke my anger. I wasn’t going to let him.

“Oh, that’s where you’re wrong. She would talk to me after the meetings. I knew plenty about her before you showed up,” he said.

“And you don’t think she was smart enough to lie to your face about everything she told you?” I asked. He stopped for a moment, clearly confused at that possibility. “You didn’t get as far past her as you think you did, Armando Rossi.” As soon as I said his real name, he flinched.

“Didn’t know we knew about that, did you?” Stephen said. Armando stayed quiet. What had clearly been bravado when we first came into the room was now turning into fear about what else we knew.

“Sephie asked you who had been pulling your strings. You never answered her, but you told her everything she needed to know,” I said. “Does Ricardo tell you when you can eat and sleep, too? Or just everything about business?” I paused, to see if he was going to respond. When he stayed quiet, I continued. “I started to suspect something was off with you when we were in Italy. No one can be as oblivious as you were about simple observations. For someone who is as successful as you are, you really had no clue what was going on or how to solve problems. That’s when I started to suspect there was something more to you.”

“That’s when you went back on the funding from the Naples project,” Armando said, piecing things together in his own mind.

“Why would I want to help fund a project with someone as inept as you in charge?” I asked. “Now, however, I realize that you were just trying to get me on projects that would tie me to Ricardo and Lorenzo. You think you could’ve controlled me by tying me to them, the same way they’ve been controlling you for years? You clearly don’t remember who I am.”

1/2

Chapter Three Hundred

“You’re not so different from me. You were just born into a better family than I was. We’ve both done things we’re not proud of, but we had to do them to survive. Why should I have to suffer because I was born into a poor family? I did what I had to do. You’re no different,” Armando said.

“You’d like to think we’re not different, but that’s where you’re wrong. It makes you feel better to think that you’re more like me. It probably helps you sleep at night to think you’re like me,” I said, rolling up my sleeves as I was talking. “Me? I have no trouble sleeping at night.” I looked down at Armando, who was beginning to look worried as he watched me and listened to my words.

“Would you like to know how I have no trouble sleeping at night?” I asked. I stood in front of him, my hands now in my pockets.

“Because every single person. I’ve killed deserved it beyond a shadow of a doubt,” I said as my fist connected with his jaw. “You think I’m weak because I wait to act, unlike my father. I watch. I observe. I collect information. Then I pass judgment. And it’s devastating. More devastating than the chaos my father would unleash. History will not remember you. Not as Armando Petrucci and not as Armando Rossi. It will be like you never existed.” I punched him in his stomach once more. I couldn’t get the image of Sephie with her hands tied behind her back in that room, with Armando standing in front of her out of my head. I’d seen the chains bolted to the floor, even though she was free of them, I knew he’d had her chained while he beat her. It was the only way he would be able to deliver that much damage without her defending herself. I’d seen the bruises on her ankles.

Armando coughed a few times as I punched him again. I stopped to let him catch his breath. I wanted to see what he would tell us about Ricardo and Lorenzo before I killed him. “What does Ricardo have over you? Is it his money you’ve been using all these years?” I asked. Armando stayed quiet as I walked away from him. I needed to put distance between us or I wasn’t going to stop. I stood and watched him as he tried to think through his options. “They’re not coming to save you. They don’t care about you. They’ve been using you to get what they want your entire life. You’re just a pawn,” I said. As I said that, he looked up at me. Got you.

I stood in silence for a moment longer, giving him the chance to speak. When he remained quiet, I laughed. “You really think they’re coming to save you? Sephie was right. You really are that dumb.”

The mention of Sephie thinking Armando was st*pid was enough to get a reaction from him. He tried to get free from the chair he was strapped to, but to no avail.

“Oh, somebody doesn’t like it when a girl thinks he’s st*pid,” Stephen said, looking at Ivan. “What do you think, Ivan? Mommy issues?”

“Definite mommy issues,” Ivan said. He took a step closer to Armando, bending down to look him in the eye. “What’s wrong, Armando? Did Mommy not breast feed you?” Armando spit on Ivan, but didn’t say a word. Ivan just laughed, wiped it off and wiped it back on Armando. “Mommy definitely didn’t teach you manners,” he said, walking away from Armando.

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Chapter 301

Chapter Three Hundred One

Adrik

“I bet Mommy was a drug addict, hmm? I bet she neglected you because she was too busy h**king for drug money and when she wasn’t f**king random dudes, she was probably so high she forgot she had a kid. How close am I?” Stephen said, a small smile on his face. The great thing about Stephen was his understanding of psychology. He only used it as a weapon when he got pushed past his point, which was incredibly rare, but he was well past his point when it came to what Armando did to Sephie. He knew how to mindf**k a person better than anyone else and he enjoyed doing it.

Armando started to struggle again, trying to get free, again to no avail. “That’s why you pick the women you pick. Sephie was only partially wrong when she said you had a savior complex. You do have a savior complex, but you’re also trying to recreate your mother in every girl you f**k. You get them h**ked on drugs so you can be their savior. But she was dead on accurate about your superiority complex. When the initial high of f**king a new woman wears off, you either kill them or leave them as addicts, completely broken, because they disgust you. Just like mommy dearest. No wonder you need help sleeping at night,” Stephen said.

Armando was still struggling to get free, but now he began yelling in Italian incoherently as loud as he could. His face was a deep shade of red as his anger took over completely. Viktor didn’t say a word, he just took a bandana out, rolled it up, walked behind Armando, and gagged him with it. Because Armando’s arms were tied to the chair, he could do nothing but take it.

“G**damn yelling. I can’t stand yelling. They were right. Your mother taught you zero manners while she was f**king the whole town,” Viktor said, walking back to the door of the room. Armando was still yelling, but now it was m*ffled by the w*d of cloth shoved in his mouth, which admittedly was much nicer than having to listen to him screaming.

“Ricardo and Lorenzo probably knew all of this when they chose you,” I said. As soon as I said they had chosen him, he glared at me. “Oh, they definitely chose you, Mando. You see, you might still be under the impression that you were ‘choosing’ Sephie to be your next conquest, but it’s really been you all along. You’ve been a puppet your whole life. Sephie, on the other hand, well, not only has she survived every single horrid situation she’s been put in, she’s made the perpetrator pay with his life. Don’t worry, you’re going to find this out firsthand soon enough,” I said. “You might think you’re above her, but it won’t feel like that when you’re dead and nobody remembers your name. And Sephie? She’s just getting started. The whole world will know her name.” I stood and watched as Armando struggled, still yelling, still angry beyond belief. I knew we’d found his weakness and I was planning on exploiting it even more. I wanted him to suffer as much as possible.

I turned to the guys, who were standing behind me. I said, in Russian, “I think we should leave him to his thoughts for the night.” They nodded in agreement. It had only been a little over an hour, but I was already missing Sephie. I needed to make sure she was okay. Viktor opened the door and walked out first, giving instructions to the guards.

On the elevator back to the penthouse, Stephen couldn’t help but laugh. “Well, that was way more informative than I thought it was going to be.” We all joined him in laughing, because what else could we do in that situation. While there was a tiny part of me that might’ve felt bad for Armando under different circumstances, he sealed his fate when he took part in grabbing Sephie. He just made sure his death was going to be slow and painful when he decided to beat her.

We walked quietly back into the penthouse, assuming that Sephie would be asleep. The TV was on, which was a rare occurrence for us, and the three of them were somehow all lying on the couch together, with Sephie in the middle still wrapped up like a burrito in a blanket. She was sound asleep, against Andrei, with his arm around her to keep her warm, with Misha laying in the opposite direction, holding onto her legs. I looked at them, clearly amused by the scene.

“She got really cold when you left. This was the only solution that kept her warm,” Andrei said. Misha slowly untangled himself from her legs. I watched him do it and still had no clue how he was lying the way he was and still able to watch the movie. Or how there was room on the couch for all three of them. Andrei and Misha were not small men.

“We offered to help her to bed when she started to get sleepy, but she didn’t want to be alone. She said she still didn’t trust that she wouldn’t start shaking,” Misha said.

“You don’t have to justify anything to me. That’s why I left you two with her,” I said, laughing quietly. I walked to the couch, looking down at her and Andrei, trying to weigh my options. It was not as easy to pick her up and carry her to bed now that she was hurt. Moving her was painful. I hated to wake her up, but I didn’t see a way around it given the way she’d fallen asleep against Andrei. I looked at him, saying, “tighten your grip just a little so she doesn’t move when she starts to wake up.” He nodded and I could see his arm flex around her. I knelt down in front of her, my hand against her cheek. “Sephie, I need you to wake up,” I said softly, my thumb rubbing her cheek lightly. She mumbled in her sleep and started to move, but Andrei stopped her. Her eyes opened, seeing me in front of her. I was immediately hit with her warmth, causing me to smile at her.

“You’re back,” she said, quietly, lazily blinking away the sleep.

“Come on, let’s get you to bed. I didn’t want to hurt you by moving you in your sleep,” I said. “I still don’t understand how the three of you could fit on that couch.”

Her gorgeous smile made my heart threaten to stop. “It’s simple, really. Magic,” she said as she started to try and unwrap herself from the blanket. Andrei helped her and then kept hold of her as he sat up slowly while I moved her legs so she was sitting. She was able to stand up almost on her own, with only a little bit of help from me this time. “How long have you been gone? What time is it?” she asked. Ivan answered her, telling her we’d only been gone a little under two hours. “I can take more superprofen before I go back to bed, then,” she said, walking slowly toward the kitchen. I caught her, steering her toward the bedroom instead.

“I’ll get it, love. It’ll be faster this way,” I said, grinning at her.

“Solid logic,” she said, walking toward the bedroom.

Chapter Three Hundred Two

Sephie

I managed to sleep through the entire night. I'm not even sure I moved at all once I went back to bed. I was so happy to be in our bed, with Adrik next to me. I was warm, I was comfortable, it was Heaven. Instead of trying to position me to lay on his chest, I slept on my good side, my back pressed against him, and under the covers. It helped me stay warm, which helped me sleep the whole night.

I felt him start to stir and felt his grip on me tighten slightly as he tried to wake me up, but made sure I wouldn't move too suddenly. I opened my eyes, but was disappointed that I couldn't see him right away. "I like it much better when I can see you first thing when I open my eyes," I said, still feeling very sleepy. I felt the vibration in his chest as he laughed quietly at me. He moved so his cheek was against my neck, brushing his facial hair against my neck softly. I felt his lips on my neck, kissing me softly. "I also like it much better when I can respond without completely killing the pleasure," I said.

He laughed again, but pulled his arm from under my head. He got up and moved so he was lying in front of me, his boyish grin on his face. "Better?" he asked as he lied down in front of me, his hand on my cheek.

"Much," I said, feeling the warmth that I always felt when I thought about just how much I loved him.

"You slept the whole night. I'm surprised," he said.

"I was happy to be back in this bed, apparently. With you," I said, loving the feel of his hand running lightly over my face and neck. "You weren't gone very long last night. I expected it to be later when you got back." I closed my eyes again, concentrating on the feeling of his touch.

"We got unexpected information from Armando that made it clear he needed to have to sit with it overnight," he said. I opened my eyes, curious as to what information they could've found out that would've prolonged things. Adrik laughed. "As Stephen put it, he has mommy issues," he said.

"Does he now? What kind of mommy issues?" I asked.

"Stephen nailed it. That guy will use psychology as a weapon when he wants to. He's just as good as you about figuring people out, he just doesn't want to until he wants to destroy the person," he said.

I smiled. "Stephen is much like Ivan, but instead of not wanting anyone to know how wise he is to protect his peace, Stephen doesn't want anyone to know how wise he is because he's insecure about his knowledge. I'm guessing his parents were hard on him or he had a sibling that told him he was st*pid a lot as a kid. He's still not over it, which is hilarious because he's seriously one of the smartest people I know."

Adrik just grinned at me. "You two should start working together. No secret is safe."

I laughed weakly, trying to not cause pain in my ribs. "What did he say about Armando?"

"I'm still not sure if he was guessing or if he knew for sure, but he said Armando's mom was probably an addict and h**ked to get money for drugs. He said she likely neglected him because she was always either whoring or so high she forgot she even had a son."

It suddenly all made sense. My eyes went wide as I said, "that's why he chooses the women he does and why he gets them addicted. He's trying to be their savior, but then he's disgusted that they become addicts like his mom so he disposes of them."

Adrik just laughed at me. "I'm going to have to start paying Vinny more. You and Stephen both are going to need more sandwiches. That's exactly what he said, too."

I suddenly remembered my extra sandwich from the day before that I hadn't eaten yet. My stomach also remembered. Adrik just laughed. "I had to bring up Vinny's," he said, shaking his head as he got up to help me out of bed.

"What else did you find out last night?" I asked as I stood up slowly to walk to the bathroom.

"Not much." Adrik said as he walked to the closet. He could talk loud enough that he kept talking to me while I was in the bathroom and he was grabbing me clothes in the closet. "He said he thinks that he and I are a lot alike, which i found amusing. And I think he's still under the impression that he thinks Ricardo and Lorenzo are coming to save him."

I felt momentary panic at his last sentence. When I didn't respond right away, Adrik poked his head in the bathroom. His face softened as he walked to me, frozen in place in front of the sink. "They're not coming to save him, love. He's outlived his usefulness to them now. They don't care about him. Besides, Lorenzo is dead. So is Anthony. I still don't know that much about Ricardo, but he's at least smarter than Armando. He knows he can't do anything against me. Especially not without Lorenzo."

"They're dead? When did that happen?" I asked. He started to help me with the shirt of his I'd worn to bed last night. He walked to the shower, turning the water on, then back to me to help me finish getting completely undressed. I held my braid up, asking, "can you tie this up for me? Then I don't have to wash it. Viktor can redo it later. I don't want to be in the shower that long this time."

"Of course, solnishko," he said as he tried to figure out how to do it. He'd watched me put my hair up a million times, but it's one thing to watch and another to do. He answered my first question as he worked on my hair. "Trino took care of Tony and Enzo the same time we came to get you and Ivan. We still weren't completely sure who else took you, but we were hoping Sal was involved and would be at the building so we could take care of him at the same time."

"But what's Sal going to do when he finds out?" I asked.

"He doesn't know, yet. I called Trino from the hospital and asked him to keep it quiet until you were out of the hospital. I need to call him later today. Once he's had time to wake up," he said. He had managed to take the braid out and put my hair up in a very messy bun. It was out of my way and it meant I could be in the shower for a shorter time, so I was very happy with the results.

"Trino knows I was taken?" I asked as he started to take my arm out of my sling. I held onto it with my right arm as much as I could. It didn't hurt quite as much today, but it was still extremely painful.

"Trino knew you were taken a few hours after it happened. Gus and Oscar called him to tell him about the warehouses. They told him then." He helped me into the shower. The warm water did help me relax, but only slightly. My shoulder was still more painful than I would've liked. "I'll hurry," he said. I knew he felt my pain,

so I didn't even bother to try and hide it from him.

"How is Trino going to tell Sal?" I asked, trying to focus more on Adrik's hands on me instead of the pain in my side and shoulder.

"I'm not sure. I just asked him to wait. I didn't ask for details. I called him right after I got into bed with you in the hospital. I was more worried about you than anything else so I didn't really even think to ask for details." He stood in front of me, his s*xy smirk on his face. I felt the pull in my chest that I knew was from him as he leaned down to kiss me. Suddenly the pain in my side and shoulder were now in the background. His desire for me was the strongest feeling I could feel. I moaned quietly in his mouth as I relished the break from pain that he offered. He kissed me harder, his desire for me growing. I wanted him to be able to pull me close, but I also knew it would likely cause me extreme pain. I couldn't even use my one good hand to touch him right now without risking extreme pain when I let go of my cast. He pulled back slightly, so he could see me, both of his hands on either side of my face still. I saw the familiar look in his eyes that said mine were dark. He was both incredibly aroused, but also perplexed.

"I'm frustrated. I can't touch you without pain right now and you can't hold me like I want you to without pain right now. It's very frustrating," I said. He leaned down and kissed me once more, gently, then turned the water off.

"Let's get your arm strapped down again. At least that will take care of one thing on your list," he said as he grabbed a towel for me.

"What do you wanna bet Trino comes up with some amazing scheme to announce to Sal that Tony and Enzo are dead? Like he has their heads delivered to Sal. First class, of course," I said, trying not to laugh too hard as Adrik helped me get dressed.

"I'll make sure to ask him when I call him today. I'm sure he'll want to talk to you, too. He was worried about you. Everyone was worried about you," he said, helping me get my arm strapped back down. I took in as deep of a breath as I could manage once my arm was secured and mostly weightless on my shoulder again.

"They don't know I'm hard to kill," I said, grinning at him.

"I think we should keep it that way," he said.

Sarah A*bott

she so strong and I'm still in love with this boo

anyone else wondering where the hell Giana is now? absolutely no mention of her for ages now

Chapter Three Hundred Three

Sephie

The guys were already in the penthouse when we walked out. “What time do you psychos wake up every morning? You’re always faster than us,” I said walking up to Ivan, who I knew for a fact woke up at st*pid hours of the morning, putting my good arm around his shoulders. I loved that he was so tall, I didn’t have to lean down to reach him even when he was sitting at the kitchen island.

He looked up at me, his face softening. “You look better this morning, princess. You must’ve slept better last night,” he said.

“She slept the entire night. We both needed it,” Adrik said. He immediately looked at me, with a stern look. He knew I was going to feel guilty for that. I just stuck my tongue out at him, holding my ribs so I could laugh. Stephen was next to Ivan, so I moved to him. “I heard you left Armando vulnerably diagnosed last night. What else did you learn while you were reading his thoughts, my favorite vampire?” I asked as I slid my arm around his shoulders.

He grabbed my wrist and held onto it gently as he laughed. “I hope he didn’t get any sleep last night. He has no one to blame but himself,” he said.

“The guys that are on him said he didn’t sleep. He was quiet for long enough that they tried to take the gag out. He started yelling again almost immediately, so they put it back in,” Viktor said, laughing his deep belly laugh.

“You guys had to gag him? I didn’t know that part,” I said, somewhat surprised.

“He might’ve started yelling in Italian at some point. I can’t stand yelling. So, I shut him up,” Viktor said, still laughing.

“Do you have a camera on him? Do you want to know what he said?” I asked, walking back toward Adrik.

Adrik walked the rest of the way to me, pulling me against him gently. “I don’t want you to ever have to see him again, love. It’s not important,” he said, kissing my cheek, then rubbing his cheek gently against mine.

“But how do you know it’s not important if you don’t know what he said,” I said, leaning into him.

“He started yelling after I vulnerably diagnosed him, as you say,” Stephen said. “I would think he was likely telling me off and trying to disprove my theory. You saw him once the polished exterior began to c*ack. He lost control of his anger quickly. I would bet good money that’s what happened last night. It happened again when Boss told him he’d been chosen specifically for that reason.”

“Wait, what reason?” I asked.

“Boss told him that Ricardo and Lorenzo had picked Armando because he was easy to control and likely because they knew he had issues,” Viktor said.

“Mommy issues,” Ivan said, giving me his most mischievous grin.

“Definite mommy issues,” I agreed. “What happened after that?” I asked.

“That’s when we left him. I want to break him before he dies,” Adrik said, very matter-of-factly. Instead of being shocked at his admission, like some part of me knew I should be, I found myself agreeing with him. I fully supported him breaking Armando before he killed him. For me, there was no question that I wanted that to happen. I don’t know how I feel about this.

Adrik had cleared his schedule, except for Armando, until I got more mobile. He still wasn’t comfortable with having any conversations in his office for the time being. It wasn’t that it wasn’t secure, but there were plenty of people in the office during the day. It was too much of a risk, regardless of whether we were speaking Russian or not. He would deal with Armando at night, once everyone in the office went home. Since Armando was loud, he wouldn’t risk anyone in the office hearing him. They kept him gagged during the day, just in case.

I also knew that he simply didn’t want to be apart from me. We hadn’t discussed it yet, but I could feel his unease at the thought of having to leave me just for the short time last night. I knew he would struggle to come to terms with this incident, much like he struggled after the ball.

That’s the funny thing about life. You find something that you think you can’t live without and life has a way of showing you that you can. It might seem cruel to some, but the universe, G*d, whatever you want to believe in just wants you to know how powerful you are. Nothing more. It’s not out to get you. It’s just out to show you what you can handle.

The day passed much like the day before, with me translating in between naps. The acupuncturist came back again in the early afternoon, which helped my pain levels. My appetite was beginning to normalize, as well. Misha ended up eating my extra sandwich that Andrei made sure to get for me, despite Andrei’s protests.

After the acupuncturist left, Adrik called Trino to fill him in. He put the call on speaker so we could all hear.

“Jefe, how’s your sweet angel?” Trino asked when he answered the call.

“She’s home now, Trino. She’s still in a lot of pain, but she’s going to be okay,” Adrik said. We could hear Trino. cursing in Spanish on the other end.

“And Armando? Have you killed him for it yet?”

“No, he’s currently suffering for what he did to me,” I said,

“Miha. I can’t tell you how wonderful it is to hear your voice. I’ve been worried about you. I’m relieved to hear that you’re going to be okay,” he said. Trino was rarely 100% serious when he talked, usually only when he was angry, but he was incredibly genuine when he spoke to me.

“Don’t go all soft on me now, Trino,” I said, trying not to laugh too loudly. “There’s still the matter of how dramatically you’re going to end Massimo.”

Trino laughed. “He thinks I’m going to let him live. He doesn’t know about Anthony and Lorenzo yet, but he will soon enough. Everyone will soon enough, as soon as Jefe gives me the okay.”

As Trino was talking, I heard background noise that wasn’t the usual background noise from Colombia. I heard someone yelling in English and cars h*nking like he was in the city. I looked at Adrik, who hadn’t heard it and mouthed ‘keep him talking for a minute.’ Then I motioned for Misha to come to me. We stepped away slightly from Adrik so Trino couldn’t hear us.

“I want to try something. I think Trino is in the city, can you see him?” I asked Misha as I took his hand. He got his faraway look in his eye and suddenly we could both see Trino. In the city. He was with Gus and Oscar. We could also see Trino’s normal security guys with him. We could see him talking to Adrik on the phone, then it was like someone hit the fast forward button. We could see him outside a house, but hidden, watching as packages were delivered. He was like a kid, excited to play a prank on someone. Misha squeezed my hand and said quietly, “that’s Sal’s house.”

“Oh, dear G*d, I know what he’s doing,” I said. I felt Misha squeeze my hand and knew that he had also seen what Trino’s plan was. Once I let go of Misha’s hand, the vision stopped for both of us. I walked back over to Adrik and whispered in his ear, “ask him if he wants to meet while he’s in the city.” Adrik looked surprised, but glanced to Misha who confirmed it.

As the conversation was wrapping up, Adrik said, “and we should meet while you’re here. It’s not often you make it to the city.”

“Dios mio, how did you know. No one knows I’m here yet,” Trino said, completely surprised.

“Have you met Sephie?” Adrik said, laughing. “Literally nothing gets by her.”

“How did she know?”

“If I told you that, I’d have to kill you, Trino. And I’ll be incredibly offended if you’re here and don’t at least stop by to say hi,” I said as Adrik put one arm around my hips to gingerly pull me closer to him.

“Miha, it’s because of you that I didn’t tell Jefe. I didn’t want it to be too much for you. You need time to heal,” he said.

“I appreciate your concern, Trino. But I’m fine. It would be good to see you again,” I said.

“Miha, how could I say no? I should come before I let Sal know about Anthony and Lorenzo. It’s going to get crazy after that, I’m sure.”

I put my hand over my mouth so I wouldn’t say anything and give away that I knew what his plan was. Adrik looked at me curiously. Misha was also trying to hold in his laughter. Adrik finished the conversation, then looked to both me and Misha for explanation. I started giggling and couldn’t stop myself, so Misha had to answer. “He’s going to deliver their heads to Sal’s front door.”

Adrik’s eyes went wide, looking straight at me. “How do you do that??” he asked.

“We saw it while you were on the phone,” Misha said.

“No, she knew that was happening this morning, before I talked to Trino. She said that’s what he was going to do after our shower,” Adrik said. The guys all looked at me now, still giggling, but now holding my ribs.

“Apparently Trino’s flair for the dramatic is something I’m clearly tapped into,” I said.

“We should tell him to record it so we can show it to Armando. He’s still holding out hope that they’re going to come save him,” Ivan said.

Chapter Three Hundred Four

Sephie

Trino stopped by the building a few hours later, with Gus and Oscar. I was surprised to see Chen with them as well. Instead of bringing all those people to the penthouse, I assured Adrik I'd be okay in his office for a while.

"Chen, I'm surprised you're here too," I said as they walked into the office. I hadn't sat down yet, as I didn't want to be rude when everyone walked in. Chen clearly looked relieved to see me and walked toward me. Of course, Adrik was by my side, with Ivan and the rest of the guys close by as well. Chen glanced at Adrik, who tried to put him at ease right away. "It's good to see you again, Chen," he said, extending his hand to him. Trino walked in soon after Chen, so Adrik kissed my temple gently and walked to him. Chen took the opportunity to hug me, but not before Adrik warned him. "Gently," he said sternly, as he walked away.

"How are you, my girl?" Chen asked quietly.

"I mean, I've been better, but I'm here, so that counts," I said, smiling at him. "I see you've met Trino finally."

"Yeah, you were right. Good dude. They told me they were coming to see you, so I wanted to tag along. I almost called your giant secretary to check on you, but I didn't want to be a bother," he said.

Viktor was close enough that he heard Chen. "It wouldn't be a bother, Chen. You can call anytime," Viktor said. He winked at me when I turned to smile at him, which caused Chen to relax a little more.

Adrik walked back to me, with Trino beside him. Chen took a few steps away to give them room. The look on Trino's face was one of slight horror. Here I thought I was starting to look better. I grabbed my ribs so I could laugh slightly. "You're not good for my self-esteem when you look at me like that, Trino. I thought I was starting to look better," I said, smiling at him. Once he saw me smile, his face softened and he relaxed.

"Miha, forgive me. I was not expecting…"

"The colors? I know. They're impressive when you first see them. You should see my stomach. It's like a unicorn beat me up, really," I said. Adrik clicked his tongue at me, but he was smirking at me, nonetheless.

Trino looked to Ivan. Pointing at him, he said, "he doesn't look much better, but you're more colorful."

"She likes to live life in technicolor, Trino," Ivan said, grinning at me. I grabbed my ribs to laugh again. It was getting the slightest bit easier to do normal things like laugh, but there was still tremendous pain involved. I wasn't sure if it was actually getting better or if I was just getting used to the pain.

"Trino, please sit. You can tell me why you decided to come to the city and tried to avoid seeing us," I said, smiling at him. Misha and Andrei moved to help me, as Adrik sat on one of the couches first so they could put me in his lap. I leaned back against him, crossing my legs in between his.

Trino laughed again, once again asking for my forgiveness. "Miha, I meant no disrespect. I just knew that if they had managed to put you in the hospital, it likely wasn't good. I didn't want to cause you more pain by having to see me. I came to the city to personally deliver Anthony and Lorenzo to Sal, so he couldn't mistake the message. I want to see the look on his face," he said

"When he opens the boxes and sees their heads?" I asked. Trino's expression quickly went to one of complete shock.

"How, Miha? I haven't…"

"It's the most dramatic way I could think of. Turns out I was right," I said. All the guys, including Adrik, laughed since they knew the real truth. Misha caught my eye and smiled his handsome, wide smile at me. "I enjoy your flair for the dramatic. It's one of my favorite things about you, Trino."

Trino laughed. Oscar, who had been quiet to this point, said, "mine's better." Gus smacked his shoulder, but laughed at him.

"Yours is quite good as well, Oscar. I never got a chance to thank you for helping them get me and Ivan out. I know it was you and Andrei that created the distraction so they could ask nicely for us back," I said. "And thank you Gus and Chen for helping to find us. You're all the best."

"Word has gotten out about what happened, Sephie. The people in the city aren't happy with Sal or the other bosses, for that matter. It might've been Sal and Armando that took you, but the people know the other bosses were involved somehow. Or at least complicit. They're thankful to Ghost for stopping the plan for the brawn, but they heard about you being taken and they're p*ssed. The people love you," Gus said.

It was my turn to be shocked. "The people don't know me. How can they love me?"

"They know enough. They've seen you around town. You're always smiling and nice to everyone. You're like the fairytale princess for them," Gus said.

Ivan snapped his fingers and pointed to me, "called it." I laughed before I could grab my ribs, so I ended up cursing while still laughing.

"You have to like give me warning before you make my laugh now," I said.

We talked for a while, before Gus brought up Armando. "Is he still alive?" he asked.

I felt Adrik nod his head, tightening his hold around me just slightly. "We got some unexpected information about him last night. I might be enjoying breaking his mind completely before he dies," he said.

Trino laughed. "This is why I like you so much, Jefe."

Trino stayed until well after the sun went down, making it the perfect time to deliver his surprise to Sal. He really was like a kid that was waiting to pull a prank on someone. It was just how Misha and I saw it earlier. The excitement on his face was unmistakable.

As everyone left, I looked at the guys saying, "I think we should come up with possible theories on what Sal's going to do when he opens his early Christmas gifts. I think there's a good chance he'll get scared and run, but I also think I underestimated his psychosis. He might go full monster and go after Trino, then us."

"I say run," Ivan said. "I think a lot of his bravado was backed by Lorenzo. I think it's pretty clear he's the smarter of those two."

"I think Ricardo is the wild card in this situation, too. I'm wondering if he's going to step into Lorenzo's role and start pulling the strings for Sal now that his brother is dead," Stephen said.

"It does make me wonder how he's stayed out of the spotlight for so many years, but had so much control over Armando," Viktor said.

"Was he connected to the boss that Armando replaced?" I asked. We hadn't given much thought to that boss. I saw a lightbulb moment for Viktor and Stephen when I asked my question. I smiled at them, motioning for Andrei to help me up. "We clearly need to go back upstairs," I said.

It didn't take Viktor long to find a link between Ricardo and Giovanni, the boss before Armando took over. "That explains why Armando picked the surname he's been using all these years, too. It's what connects Ricardo and Giovanni. That's why it looked like Ricardo and Armando were distantly related. It looks like he's distantly related to Giovanni too, if you believe his fake last name," Viktor said.

"Ricardo had to have told him to use that name then. Probably before he ever became an underboss for Giovanni," I said. "It was just distant enough that nobody would really think it was a lie, but just believable enough that no one would question it."

It was only a short time later that Adrik's phone beeped. He looked at it, finding a video of Sal finding the boxes with Anthony's and Lorenzo's heads in them. Trino was thoughtful enough to show us what was in the boxes before they were left on Sal's doorstep, just for Armando. When Adrik showed me the video, he covered my eyes for that part. "You don't need to see that, solnishko," he said. It was only a few seconds and he pulled his hand from my eyes. I wasn't going to argue. It wasn't something I was desperate to see.

It wasn't something that Sal wanted to see, either. He was clearly distraught. Trino timed it so that Sal found the boxes as he was coming home. He'd apparently been having him watched so he knew when to time it just right so that it was indeed Sal to open the boxes and not one of his men. Sal was shocked, angry, distraught, and inconsolable in the span of a few minutes. He immediately got on his phone, but the audio wasn't close enough that we could understand what he was saying. Whoever he was calling, didn't pick up. He tried another call. Once again, no answer.

It suddenly hit me. "He just called them," I said. "He just called Anthony and Lorenzo. He doesn't believe it's them in the boxes."

Stephen said out loud what I was thinking. "If it wasn't Sal, this would be heartbreaking."

"I'm going to enjoy watching Armando see this," Ivan said. "He might be so crushed that we don't even need to kill him. He'll suffer the rest of his life as a poor man."

"You might be on to something, Super Squish. If I had two functioning arms, I'd be able to hug you. But alas, here I lie. Completely useless," I said, grinning at him.

"Not completely useless, sestrichka. Your brain still works," Viktor said, laughing his deep belly laugh that always made everyone around him happier for hearing it.

Chapter Three Hundred Five

Sephie

Adrik left me with Andrei and Misha once again so he could go back downstairs to deal with Armando. He wanted Armando to see the video and to know that Lorenzo was dead. After they left, Andrei had questions about Misha's ability to see things. "Does it work on just anybody? Like could you pick a random person and just spy on them?" he asked.

"I don't know. I've never tried that," Misha said.

"How have you never tried that? That would've been the first thing I tried," Andrei said, laughing.

"Who do you want to know about, Bubba?" I asked.

Before Andrei could answer, Misha answered for him. "Tori." I looked to Andrei, shocked that he would be curious about her still, even after everything. But I had to admit, I was curious about Max as well, so I couldn't give him too much sh*t.

"Okay, I can't say much here. I'm curious about Max too," I said when Andrei looked somewhat worried about what we'd think of him. Misha got the faraway look in his eye that meant he was trying to see what he could about either one of them. He tried for a few minutes, but got nothing. I unwrapped my hand from the blanket, stretching it out to him. "What if I help?" I asked. He moved closer to me, as I was leaning against Andrei for maximum warmth.

He grabbed my hand, then said, "Tori first." I nodded my head, trying to think about Tori. It took longer than normal, but we eventually saw her. She was in a house, sitting in a leather chair, having a conversation with an older man that I didn't recognize immediately. She looked comfortable, like she knew the man. They were clearly having a pleasant conversation. She was intently listening to what he was saying, he appeared to be captivated by her response. Misha squeezed my hand, which usually meant he knew something I didn't. "That's one of Sal's underbosses," he said.

"Well, that's an interesting twist I wasn't expecting," I said. The vision stopped when we started talking. I looked to Andrei, curious. "What made you want to know about Tori, Bubba? Did something happen?"

He shook his head no. "I haven't heard anything from her since the day Boss fired her. But I've always been worried she was going to try and retaliate after he fired her. I thought Max was it, but then when you cut ties with Max completely, she likely figured out that plan wasn't going to work. Her level of crazy was much higher than I think anyone else realizes."

"She did get fired twice because of me," I said.

"It's more than that, spider monkey. She hated you before there was a reason to hate you. Getting fired just added fuel to the fire. If she's talking to one of Sal's underbosses, that can't be good. She knows where the house is," Andrei said.

"Would she be that st*pid though?" I asked.

"Hate makes people do a lot of crazy things, gazelle. I don't put anything past her. I do want to know how she knows Sal's guy, though," Misha said.

"Do you know his name? Viktor can find out, I'm sure. He can find out anything, apparently," I said.

"I don't remember his name, but I know what he looks like. We keep records. I can find his name tomorrow," Misha said.

"How do we get sound next time?" I asked. "I wanted to hear what she was saying, but couldn't."

Misha laughed. "You're seriously asking me? You know more than I know, Sephie."

"Well, that's not helpful. I don't know anything," I said, holding my ribs so I could laugh.

"I think all you have to do is assume it's going to happen and let it," Andrei said. "The weird stuff seems to be happening faster now. It'll happen soon. Much like your training, spider monkey, sometimes the power is in the surrender."

"Bubba, how did you get to be so smart and so pretty at the same time?" I asked, grinning at him.

"I don't know, spider monkey. I just woke up like this," Andrei said, trying to keep a straight face.

I almost didn't grab my ribs in time for the laughter to hit. "D*mmit, warning!" I said, still laughing.

"Okay, now I'm curious about whether we can see Max," Misha said.

Andrei laughed at him. "I can't believe you've never thought to try this before now."

I put my hand out for Misha and thought about Max this time. This time wasn't any faster, but we did eventually see him. He was at work, flirting with the women at the bar like normal. Unlike the scene with Tori, the fast forward button was hit and we were watching another scene unfold. The same man that Tori had been talking to was following Max as he was leaving the restaurant. Max, as usual, was texting and not paying attention to his surroundings, so he had no idea the man was behind him. Misha and I watched as the man walked up behind Max, pulled a gun, and shot him. I thought I screamed in my head, but Andrei was holding onto me once the vision stopped, trying to console me.

"What did you see, spider monkey? What happened?" he asked. He was clearly concerned, his arm tight around me.

"We just watched Max die," Misha said.

"Oh f**k," Andrei said.

Adrik

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Armando's eye was slightly less swollen tonight than it had been last night, so he could open it farther than he'd been able to previously. Good. He'll be able to see the video more clearly. I walked into the room with Viktor, Ivan, and Stephen. Armando stayed quiet, partly because the gag was still in his mouth, partly because he was waiting to see what I said first this time. He had decidedly less bravado tonight than last night.

"I have something you need to see," I said. Armando looked at me, trying to remain calm and not let on that he was nervous. I took my phone out of my pocket and held it for Armando to watch the video. You could clearly hear Trino's voice in the video, warning anyone that tried to betray him in the future. What happened to Anthony and Lorenzo was a message to anyone who considered going against him in the future. The message was loud and clear when the video panned down to show their heads in the boxes.

Armando was stunned when he saw the video. We could see his brain trying to come up with alternatives. He really was still convinced that Lorenzo was coming to save him. His brain was struggling to process the information that he might not be getting out of here now.

I let him try to think his way out of his situation for quite a while. It was probably close to 20 minutes that I let him stew before saying anything. I couldn't deny that I got extreme satisfaction from watching him try to think of a way to save himself now. The guys were also enjoying watching him. It was obvious what was happening. Finally, I got up and stood in front of him. "I bet you're really wishing you'd taken Sephie's advice and jumped off the roof when she told you to, aren't you?"

He looked at me, with the look of a man that knows he's going to die. I'd seen the look plenty of times in my life. He was slowly giving up. He was slowly accepting his fate and coming to the realization that he was going to have to pay for what he did to Sephie.

I was standing in front of him, enjoying the silence as it was tormenting him more than I thought it would. I suddenly got hit with panic. I knew it wasn't mine. I knew it had to be Sephie. I waited to see if it passed, as I didn't want to run upstairs if she'd fallen asleep and forgotten she couldn't move, but it was growing stronger. I felt the pull in my chest so strongly that it was hard to ignore. I needed to go to her. I looked at Armando, then to the guys. I nodded my head toward the door, indicating we were going to leave. We walked out without another word.

Once outside, Ivan asked, "something happened upstairs didn't it?"

"She's panicked, but I don't know why. It's getting stronger, which is why I wanted to leave," I said as I walked quickly to the elevator.

"Armando will torture himself if we leave him in silence. This actually works out perfectly," Stephen said.

"How did you know something happened with Sephie?" I asked Ivan once we were on the elevator.

"Apparently I can feel her panic now too. It came on suddenly, but strong. I saw you glance away from Armando right after I felt it, then to the door, like you were deciding if you wanted to leave. The feeling didn't go away, which is why I assume we're on our way upstairs," Ivan said as the doors to the elevator opened.

We rushed into the penthouse to find Andrei and Misha with her on the couch. They all looked panicked, quite frankly.

"What happened?" I said, rushing to Sephie. "Are you okay? Why are you panicked?"

"Oh sh*t, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pull you from downstairs," Sephie said as I knelt down in front of her.

Andrei still had his arm around her, trying to keep her calm, but he looked just as nervous as she felt.

"We both felt it this time," Ivan said. "What's going on? What happened?"

"I asked Misha if he could see just anybody in his visions. I haven't been able to get Tori off my mind the last day or two. Like something doesn't feel right, but I don't know what. They were able to see her talking to one of Sal's underbosses, but we don't know which one. Then Sephie was curious about Max, so they tried it with him. He was at work, like usual, then they said it fast forwarded and he was leaving work, not paying attention to his surroundings, like usual, and the underboss that Tori was talking to walked up behind him and shot him in the head," Andrei said. "That's when she panicked."

I looked to Misha. "Do you know when this is happening? Has it already happened?"

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 306

Chapter Three Hundred Six

Adrik

I don't know. This is all so new to me. When we saw him at work, I think that's where he is now. I don't know if the underboss is planning on doing it tonight or if it's another night we saw. I don't know how much his life got fast forwarded," Misha said.

I looked at my watch, then back to Sephie, who was fighting back tears now. "What time did you usually get done with work? It was always well after midnight, right?" I asked.

She nodded. "Usually between 1-2 on busy nights, by the time we got all our chores done for the next shift."

It was still early. I looked at Viktor. "Go downstairs and get the files for the underbosses for Sal so we know which one we're looking for." He nodded and walked toward the door. I turned and looked at Stephen. "The back parking lot of the restaurant was easy to cover, if I remember correctly? You had a good vantage point?"

"Yeah, super easy. Open. I could see everything," Stephen said. "I'll be able to get the underboss before he gets Max, if that's where your mind is going."

Sephie's eyes got even wider as she realized what I was planning. "But you hate Max…"

"Doesn't mean he deserves to die like this, love," I said. "Tori might be a different story, but Max is innocent in this one." She made a slight move toward me, but winced in pain. Andrei helped her sit up and I pulled her toward me. She wrapped her right arm around my shoulders, burying her face in my neck. I could feel the panic subside slowly.

Viktor walked back in with the files, showing them to Misha. He looked through a couple, then found the guy. "That's him. That's the guy we saw Tori with and the guy that was in the parking lot with Max," he said.

"We stop this, we stop her next. She can't get away with this," Andrei said, his anger clearly visible. He looked to Misha, asking, "can you find her again once this is over?"

Misha shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not sure. I might need Sephie's help again, but if we found her tonight, I'd assume I can find her again."

"Good. She and I are going to have a very difficult conversation," Andrei said.

"Go. Stop this if you can. Do what you want to her," I said. "Ivan stays. The rest of you can go." Andrei and Misha stood up from the couch, following Viktor and Stephen out of the penthouse. Sephie took as deep a breath as she could once they left, still trying to relax. She lifted her head from my neck, looking at me. The tears in her eyes making the colors in her eyes dance in the light.

"Thank you. I'm sorry I pulled you from downstairs," she said, looking between me and Ivan.

"I think it actually worked out perfectly, princess. Armando is going to do all the work for us tonight," Ivan said, his devious grin across his face.

I kissed her gently, then moved to the couch with her, pulling her back against me. "How so?" she asked.

"He saw the video that Trino sent. It did not go well for him," Ivan said.

"He really was still thinking that Lorenzo was coming to save him. His brain was trying to come up with alternative theories on how to get himself out of this situation. It was clearly difficult for him. I was letting him stew in the silence when I felt your panic. When it grew stronger, I made the decision to leave him. Stephen pointed out on the way up here that it would likely serve to torture him even more that we left without a word," I said.

"He's not a fan of silence," Sephie said, a small smile on her face. She looked to Ivan. "You said you felt me panic this time too?"

"Yeah, same time as Boss. I saw him look away from Armando, like he was considering his options. He never loses focus in that kind of a situation, so I knew he had to be feeling the same thing I was and I knew you were the only thing that could pull his focus away from the situation at hand," Ivan said.

She took another deep breath. I could feel her body starting to tense again. "I didn't mean to pull you guys away. I don't want to constantly be interrupting your schedule," she said.

"You seem to think you're pulling us away for insignificant reasons. Not once have you interrupted my schedule because you broke a nail, Sephie. It's always for very important reasons. You are the most important reason," I said, pulling her closer against me. She leaned her head onto my shoulder, still lost in thought.

"Have you been able to feel anything else from me, Super Squish?" she asked Ivan.

"No, this is the first one. It makes sense though. You don't panic easily. If you're panicked, it's likely because you're in danger. It seems reasonable to me that I'd be able to feel that before anything else," he said.

"You're so logical," she said. I could hear her smiling when she said it. One look at Ivan told me she was likely grinning at him.

Sephie wasn't able to sleep until the guys got back. She did relax slightly when Viktor let Ivan know they were on their way back and they had managed to stop the underboss from killing Max. She completely relaxed when they finally walked back into the penthouse.

I looked to Viktor, wanting to know how it went. "We did get lucky that it was tonight that he was planning on killing Max."

"It was just as we saw it, gazelle," Misha said. He still looked mostly surprised at what had transpired.

"Except I stopped him before he had a chance to pull the trigger. Max almost p*ssed himself, though. That was satisfying to watch," Stephen said, an uncharacteristic smile on his face.

"Better to be soiled and alive than the alternative," I said quietly. Sephie heard me, laughing as she pulled my arms tighter around her with her one good arm.

"What about Tori?" Ivan asked.

"That's where it gets fun," Viktor said.

"Misha was able to find her, so we paid her a little visit," Stephen said.

"Where was she?" Sephie asked.

"Surprisingly, still at the underboss's house. Apparently, she's been living there for a bit," Misha said.

"She will no longer be a problem," Andrei said. His anger from earlier was still evident on his face. Andrei had the same look every time he killed someone, but this time was different. Usually, he would struggle with it for days. We never gave him sh*t for it. You should struggle with it. It's not something to be taken lightly. This time, however, he looked like he was at peace with what happened already. Like he wasn't going to be struggling with it.

"Bubba…" Sephie said, trying to see how he was handling it. Andrei looked straight at her. "She learned a hard lesson of Karma tonight. You wish death on someone else, it comes back on you even harder. Maybe in her next life, she'll learn to be nicer to people," he said.

Sephie leaned back and whispered to me, "can you help me up, please?" I helped her stand up so she could go to Andrei, even though he was handling this better than I'd ever seen him handle a situation like this before. He was still standing, so she wrapped her arm around his waist while he put his arm gently around her shoulders. "This is why she popped into your mind the last couple of days. You were meant to stop this," she said.

"It almost didn't happen. I almost didn't bring it up to you and Misha earlier," he said, looking down at her. He had a serious look on his face as he was thinking about the night's events.

"It was a lesson for you, too, Bubba. That gut instinct that tells you to do something? You should always listen to it. Always. It could mean the difference between life and death," she said. "The more you listen to it, the stronger it will get. Just like your observation skills. The more you use them, the stronger they'll get," she said, smiling sweetly up at him.

He grinned at her. "Of course, you noticed,' he said.

"Have you met me?" she asked, trying not to laugh. "You've been spot on. My guess is you've always been more observant than you think you are. You're just not willing to trust yourself. You've got so much more going on than just your pretty face, Bubba," she said.

We could all see Andrei's cheeks flush when she complimented him. Misha, never one to turn down a chance to tease anyone, said, "I honestly never would've thought to try to see Tori or Max if you hadn't brought it up, Andrei. Clearly, I don't have the voyeuristic tendencies you do. But you know, no judgment here."

"Don't listen to Judgey MacJudgerpants over there, Bubba," she said, laughing at Misha who was smiling broadly at both of them. She hugged Andrei tighter, resting her head on his shoulder.

Chapter Three Hundred Seven

Adrik

“Did Max know it was you guys that saved his life?” I asked.

“Nope. He never saw us. He heard the guy drop behind him and turned around to see him dead on the ground, gun in hand. That’s when he almost p*ssed himself. I have to say, I don’t have a lot of hope that he’s going to make it to his golden years though. His survival instincts are sh*t. He just stood there in the parking lot for like 5 minutes before he finally ran to his car and left,” Stephen said. “We thought he was never going to leave.”

“Sounds about right,” I said. Sephie grinned at me. She knew I thought he was an idiot before tonight. This only proved my point even further.

“He might put it together one day, but I doubt it,” she said. “What about Sal? Now he’s lost another guy.”

“It’s going to take him much longer to figure out we were behind this one. We might’ve made it look like a murder suicide. They’ll find both of them together at his house,” Viktor said.

“Anyone who knows Tori isn’t going to question that story,” Ivan said, unable to contain his laughter.

“I checked the kitchen. There was no broccoli. I was going to leave some between them,” Misha said, causing everyone to laugh. Poor Sephie had a tight hold of her ribs to try to help ease the pain, but she couldn’t not laugh at that.

I stood up to get her next dose of superprofen. Thankfully it was time, so it would help ease the pain from laughing. She had walked from Andrei to Stephen, sliding her arm around his waist. “Thank you for saving him, even though I know you hate him just as much as everyone else,” she said.

He put his arm around her and hugged her gently. “Boss was right. Just because we don’t like him doesn’t mean he deserved that kind of ending.” She rested her head on his shoulder while he held onto her for a few moments. I watched her take as deep of a breath as she could before she turned around looking at all of us, tears once again in her eyes.

“I don’t ever want to hear any of you even considering that you might be evil or in any way not good. You just saved a man’s life that you all clearly hate tonight, for no other reason than he used to mean something to me. And you did it without a second’s hesitation. Evil men would’ve let him die and not felt bad about it,” she said. She walked slowly to the kitchen where I was standing, wiping away the stray tear that had managed to fall down her cheek.

She was right. I didn’t hesitate to save Max. Regardless of whether it was simply to end her panic, he was still alive tonight because of us. We jumped to action to save the life of an innocent, mostly innocent, he was still an idiot, person. Sephie tucked herself into my side as best she could, leaning her head on my shoulder. She was still looking at all the guys, who were quietly contemplating what she’d just said. “I love you all. More than anything,” she said.

The guys were all waiting on us when we walked out of the bedroom the next morning. It wasn’t that they woke up that much earlier than we did, they were just faster in the shower than I would ever be when Sephie was involved. A fact that I wasn’t planning on changing anytime soon.

“Who wants to be my other arm for breakfast this morning?” Sephie asked as she walked into the kitchen. She was feeling slightly better this morning. She’d managed to do a few things on her own, laughing about it the whole time. “I feel like a child learning to do this for the first time again,” she’d told me as she managed to put her pants on by herself.

“Spider monkey, you don’t have to cook breakfast. You still need time to heal. It won’t take very long to send someone to get food,” Andrei said.

“I know I don’t have to. I want to. I practically dressed myself this morning. I’m on a roll here. Don’t kill my vibe, Bubba,” she said, smiling broadly at him.

Misha literally jumped out of his chair to stand next to her. “If you’re cooking, I’m helping. I’ll do everything, even. You just have to tell me how you do it,” he said. We all laughed at his enthusiasm, but nobody protested her cooking further.

As she instructed Misha on how to cook, she worked on translating a few more things that Viktor and Stephen had found on Ricardo. Viktor had heard back from the journalist that supposedly had so much information on Ricardo and Lorenzo while Sephie and Misha were still cooking. Viktor got up and took his computer to her. “The journalist finally replied from your last email, sestrichka.”

Sephie gave instructions to Misha, then turned to read the journalist’s response. As she read, her smile got wider. She glanced at Ivan, “your method really p*ssed him off. He spent the first half of this email b*tching about how we don’t believe him. He says, ‘I put my entire life in danger to expose these men and now you accuse me of not knowing anything of significance.’ Well played, Squish,” she said.

“Told you. Journalists have delicate egos,” Ivan said.

“Oh, this is interesting. Now he wants to meet to show you everything. He says it’s not safe to send to you,” she said, looking up at Viktor.

Viktor thought for a minute, then looked to Ivan. “What do you think? Have him come here or meet him elsewhere?”

“Elsewhere. We really don’t know who this guy is. It could be some kind of trap,” Ivan said.

“He has to come to the city though. There’s no way we’re leaving right now, for any reason,” I said.

“He might be too scared to do that,” Sephie said. “He seems nervous about someone finding out he’s still alive.”

“Then we don’t meet with him. Simple as that. I’m not taking you anywhere else until you’re healed completely, solnishko,” I said, looking at her sternly enough that she wouldn’t try to argue. She grinned at me, then glanced to see where the guys were looking. When she was satisfied they were all looking away, she closed her eyes briefly, making them go dark, then looked to me once more. When she looked at me, I could feel her push her warmth to me as she was looking at me with her dark eyes, a smile on her face. It was so unexpected that I cursed quietly under my breath. She blinked again, making her eyes return to normal and acted like nothing had happened, continuing on with the conversation, while I was left trying to control myself. I’m in so much trouble.

“Once we’re done eating, I’ll take an hour out of my day to respond to him and tell him he has to come here if he wants to meet with you,” she said, grinning at Viktor.

We were all surprised that the journalist responded quickly to the demand that he come to the city to meet. He basically told Viktor to name the time and place and he’d be there.

“I expected some push back on that one,” Ivan said.

“I did too. I wonder if he’s already here then?” Sephie said, thinking aloud. She was sitting at the kitchen island with Misha while the rest of us cleaned up the kitchen.

“Do we know what he looks like?” Misha asked. Sephie nodded, then pulled a picture up from an article on his supposed death that Viktor had found previously.

Misha extended his hand to her, saying, “let’s see if we can find him.” She grinned at him, taking his hand. The rest of us stopped what we were doing to watch them, waiting to see what they would be able to see.

The process took longer than normal. Usually, Misha would see something right away, but he also usually checked in on people he already knew. It would make sense that it would take longer to find this guy given that neither Sephie nor Misha knew him.

“Got him,” Misha said quietly.

“I know that area. It’s close to where my uncle used to live,” Sephie said as she squeezed Misha’s hand tighter. They watched the movie that only they could see for a few moments longer, before they looked at each other, then to the rest of us.

“He’s already in the city. I can’t tell how long he’s lived here, but he’s living here now. I can show you on the map the area of the city he’s in,” Misha said.

“From what we saw, he keeps to himself mostly. He only goes out for necessities, doesn’t talk to many people, tries to not be seen,” Sephie said.

“He’ll be easy to watch for a few days before we meet with him, then,” Stephen said. “I love a recluse. They’re the easiest ones to watch. They almost always keep to the exact same routine.”

“I’ll go grab a map,” Viktor said.

“Should he meet with one of you, though? He might put it together who you are and who you work for,” Sephie said. “He also appears to prefer to speak Italian, which is going to be problematic.”

“Ask him if he speaks English when you respond. Tell him you’ve been using translator software to respond to him,” Ivan said.

“Even still, your Russian accents are going to give you away,” Sephie said.

Misha turned to look at her. “You’re not meeting with him either, gazelle,” he said, sternly. “If the people of the city heard about you being kidnapped, he’ll just as easily put it together who you are as he will one of us.”

“D*mmit, I got scolded twice in one morning,” she said, mostly under her breath.

Chapter Three Hundred Eight

Adrik

Viktor returned with the map, to see us laughing at the exchange. “I always miss the good stuff,” he said, laying out the map in front of Misha.

“Sephie brought up a good point that if one of us meet with this guy, he’s going to piece together who we wo for. But then she said he might only speak Italian, which is going to be problematic, implying that she should be the one to meet with him. Misha shut her down,” Andrei said, still laughing.

“That’s not happening, sestrichka. Not when you’re like this,” Viktor said, looking at her sternly.

“D*mmit. Three times,” she said.

“What about Chen? We give him an earpiece. We tell him exactly what to say to this guy. Sephie can still translate if needed. Everybody’s happy,” Stephen said.

“Except Chen. He won’t be happy. He’ll be trying not to have a heart attack that whole time,” Sephie said.

“We can coach him through it,” Andrei said. “He’ll be fine. He can totally do this.”

“We’ll be watching him the whole time. He saw what I did to Smith. He’ll know if this guy makes one wrong move, I’ll take him out,” Stephen said.

Sephie thought about it for a minute. She looked to me to see my opinion on it. It was a reasonable plan. It would keep us anonymous. He would have a hard time tracing Chen back to me and it would still get us whatever information this guy supposedly had.

Sephie sighed, then looked to Viktor. “Can I borrow your phone, Papa Bear? I’ll ask him and see what he says.”

Viktor dialed Chen’s number, put it on speaker, then handed the phone to her. I walked to her so she wouldn’t have to get up. She leaned against me while she talked to Chen. He was understandably apprehensive when she first laid-out the situation.

“You can say no, Chen. No harm. We’re just exploring our options,” I said. I might’ve known he would be less likely to say no to me.

Chen thought for a few moments, then sighed. “As long as you guys are there to make sure nothing happens, I’ll do it. And as long as Sephie can translate whatever this guy says to me in another language. She can tell you. I’m from a French family and my French is h*rrendous. Foreign languages are not my forte.”

“We’ll all be there, Chen. You have my word,” I said.

After the call ended, Viktor and Misha went over the map where they saw this guy. “We should ask to meet with him somewhere close to where he lives. I want to f**k with his head just a little,” Misha said, a mischievous grin on his face.

They found a small café near the guy’s apartment. Stephen looked it over, coming up with a few possibilities on where he could be to cover Chen. “This has potential,” he said. “I need to check it out, but it could work.”

“We can be here,” Viktor said, pointing down the street to another apartment building. “We can park on the street and not be obvious, but still close enough to hear and see everything.”

“Go check it out,” I said. “Andrei stays, the rest can go.” I had a short conversation with Sephie the night before about how Andrei was handling the Tori situation. I knew she wanted a chance to talk to him without the other guys around to make sure he was okay. This would give her that chance. This would also give Ivan time to go to the jewelers to pick up her ring.

Once the four guys left, I walked to Sephie. “I just have a couple phone calls to make downstairs, then I’ll be back up,” I said, leaning down to kiss her temple. “Are you warm enough for now?” I asked.

She smiled sweetly at me. “I’m okay for now,” she said. It took her at least three times as long as normal to stand up on her own, but she managed to do it. Her face beamed when she stood in front of me.

Andrei said, “that was so painful to watch, but I’m so proud of you, spider monkey.”

“This is a big day for me,” she said, her gorgeous smile across her face. I leaned down and kissed her quickly, but passionately, not trusting myself to be able to stop.

“I’ll be back soon,” I said, winking at her. I knew she was completely aware that I’d asked Andrei to stay just so she could have a chance to talk to him. I was also looking forward to her thanking me later for it. I’ll take anything I can get until she’s healed fully again.

Sephie

Once Adrik left the penthouse, I looked at Andrei who was quite happy to have been the one that had to stay behind this time. He couldn’t keep his boyish grin off his face. “You know, I still laugh when I think about how I used to think I was torturing you guys when you had to stay with me. You’re still fighting over who gets to do it most of the time,” I said.

“You’re way more fun than pretty much anything else we have to do,” he said, still grinning at me. I grabbed his arm, pulling him toward one of the couches.

“I still need help sitting down on the couch. And I might’ve lied. I’m totally cold again,” I said as we walked slowly to the couch.

“I knew it! You’re always cold lately. Even more so when you’re hurt,” he said, helping me down onto the couch.

“See, you should trust your observation skills more, Bubba. You know more than you think you do. You’re the one that saw what was happening when I leveled Misha up when we saw Trino. You need to trust what your eyes are telling you,” I said as he sat down next to me, putting his massive arm around my shoulders so I could lean back against him. “And even though he’s likely never going to know it was because of you, Max has you to thank for his life today.”

He scoffed. “Yeah, I still can’t get over how close I was to not saying anything last night.”

“Wanna know what the acupuncturist told me the first time she saw me and Ivan after we were taken?”

“When she told you that you took the worst of it to save Ivan this time?” he asked.

“Yeah. I argued with her. I know you’re shocked. But I told her I didn’t do anything except run my mouth when they had us. She told me that even though I might not have been aware of what I was doing, my soul knew. She said, ‘you listened.” I grabbed his wrist with my good hand, holding onto it while I talked. “You listened last night. You might not have been aware of what was going to happen, but your soul knew,” I said. He squeezed me gently.

“So, that’s where you get all your sage advice from,” he said. I could hear the smile in his voice when he said it.

“Not all of it, but she does say some incredibly wise things. Like all of you, I think she was meant to be in my life.” Andrei was quiet for a moment, so I asked, “how did you sleep last night, Bubba?”

He sighed. “Mostly okay. I usually don’t sleep for a couple of days after I kill someone. I did sleep some last night, though. That’s a new one for me. I feel better about this time than I ever have before, which is weird if you think about it. The few people I’ve killed before I didn’t really know. I knew Tori in the biblical sense and I’m most okay with this one. Kinda doesn’t make sense,” he said.

“Or it kinda does,” I said.

“How so?”

“You knew she deserved what she got. You knew what she was planning on having done. You knew she was capable of planning it again, should this time not work out. You knew her dark side. I think you’re beginning to see the difference between people like Ivan and Adrik, who’ve made peace with their dark sides, but who still choose to operate in the light whenever possible, and those who give in to their dark sides, like Tori clearly did. No one made her revenge f**k Max. No one made her make plans to have him killed because she got fired again for being a crazy b*tch. That was all her. And she had to pay the consequences of those actions,” I said. He remained quiet, but kept a tight hold on me, so I continued. “Just like I told Ivan, sometimes Karma uses you to deliver justice. You just handed down her sentence, Bubba.”

“You really do know exactly what to say, exactly when we need to hear it. I have no idea how you do that, but please don’t ever stop.”

I held up my pinky to him. “Pinky swear,” I said.

“What’s that?”

“Oh, for f**k’s sake, how do I keep forgetting you people don’t do this in Russia? Okay, so the pinky swear is like the holiest of holy swears. Like it’s so holy that I’m now bound to always tell you what you need to hear in every lifetime, in every realm, in all timelines for all eternity. That’s how holy it is.”

He chuckled, grabbing my pinky with his. “I’ll do the same for you, spider monkey. I’m just not as good at it as you are.”

“Yet. You’re not as good as I am, yet. This is why you should practice, Bubba.”

“I thought I was the trainer in this relationship,” he said, laughing at me.

“You are. Mostly.”

Chapter Three Hundred Nine

Sephie

I felt Adtik’s warm hand on my cheek. “Sephie, wake up, love,” he said softly. I could feel Andrei’s arm still around me, holding me firmly so I didn’t move suddenly.

“I fell asleep?” I asked. I could feel the vibration of Andrei laughing at me.

“You’ve been out for a few hours. We just didn’t want to move you. You had a very big morning. I think you wore yourself out,” Andrei said.

I looked to Adrik, who was kneeling in front of me, smiling at me. “You were already sound asleep when I came back to the penthouse. I was only gone for half an hour. Andrei said you’d been asleep for at least 15 minutes when I got back.” I tried to sit up slowly. Both Adrik and Andrei helped me. I turned around to look at Andrei. “Sorry I kept you trapped here,” I said.

“Don’t apologize. I got a nap, too,” he said, his handsome smile stretching across his face.

I couldn’t help but smile back at him. “You needed it. You look better.” He didn’t say anything, just winked at me.

“You need lunch, gazelle. The acupuncturist will be here soon, too,” Misha said from the kitchen. As if he was speaking directly to my stomach, she growled loudly. “I heard that. She agrees,” he said, laughing.

“What did you guys find out on your field trip?” I asked, as Adrik and Andrei helped me stand up from the couch. It was easier to stand up on my own from the bed or the chairs in the kitchen. Not so much from the couch yet, which I found frustrating. Once I was standing, Adrik pulled me to him, kissing me softly.

“The café we picked is a good spot. It’s close to his apartment, which will make Misha happy. It’s easy to cover, which will make me happy. And there’s plenty of places you guys can park to watch what’s going on, which will make Viktor happy,” Stephen said.

“Everyone’s happy, then. I like this,” I said. “Well, maybe except Chen. He’s probably still going to be nervous. Poor guy.” I motioned for Viktor to hand over his computer. “I’ll get started replying now. It’ll be done by next week.”

Ivan, who had gone down to grab the food when it arrived, walked back into the penthouse. “Princess, you’re awake now. Good. We got you stuff while we were out, too,” he said, setting the food down on the island.

“Got me what stuff?” I asked, sitting gingerly in one of the chairs.

Adrik leaned down and kissed my temple. “I had them get you warmer clothes while they were out. You’re always freezing right now. Andrei was right, you’re even colder when you’re hurt.”

“You did? Really?” I asked. I was completely stunned. They all noticed the look on my face, which was clearly amusing for them all given the grins on their faces.

Adrik chuckled. “I know how much you hate buying clothes for yourself, but you need more than just my sweatshirts to keep you warm right now. I don’t like that you’re always so cold.”

Ivan held up one of the shirts they’d picked up. “We’re still going to have to cut the sleeve off because there’s no way this is fitting over that,” he said pointing to my cast. “But it’s thermal so it’ll keep you warmer than you are now. Which will probably mean you’re going to sleep more,” he said, grinning at me.

“That’s just what I need,” I said, rolling my eyes. Adrik clicked his tongue at me. “It is exactly what you need, solnishko. You need time to heal. I say so.” I-felt the pull in my chest that meant he was thinking about how much he loved me. He was trying to look at me sternly, but he was failing miserably at it. I couldn’t help but laugh. “Come here,” I said, pulling him toward me so I could kiss him. “Thank you,” I said, against his lips. “And thank all of you for always taking care of me,” I said to the guys.

“You mean the same way you always take care of all of us?” Andrei said.

The acupuncture was easier for me to get through, which usually meant that I was getting closer to not needing it as frequently. It still gave me much-needed relief, so I was happy to have it daily for a little longer. Adrik and Ivan had helped me lie down, but then they left me alone since I wasn’t quite as painful. Taking my arm out of the sling wasn’t nearly as debilitating as it had been the first day. It still wasn’t pleasant, but I could manage.

“One of the others just discovered he’s like you, didn’t he?” the acupuncturist asked quietly as she was sticking needles over my body.

“Like me how? Like his observation skills?”

“Those, yes. But there’s more. He’ll come to find he knows things before they happen. He just doesn’t believe it fully yet. His soul knows already,” she said.

“I stole your line and used it on him earlier. He just saved someone’s life last night because he listened to his gut instinct.”

“Like you, he’s very wise. But he’s young compared to you. He doesn’t trust himself yet. That’s what you’re here to help him with.”

I laughed softly. “I made him a pinky swear.”

“Have you done that with all of them?” she asked.

“Not all of them yet. Most of them.” I looked at her, curious as to why she would ask. She smiled softly.

“You’re ensuring that your souls stay linked. This won’t be the only lifetime you spend together.”

“But it’s just a childish thing. I only tell them it has that much power to get them to agree to it because it’s so silly.”

“You might think it’s childish, Sephie. They take it very seriously. You should too. You have more power than you think. I told your boyfriend this the first time I saw you after you and Ivan were taken. You, your boyfriend, and Ivan, you’re older than the others. The one who can see the unseen is older than the rest of them, but not as old as you. Part of why you’re here and why you’re all together is to help them all discover their gifts. You didn’t think the others had gifts, but now you’re discovering they do. The other two do too, but they’re scared. They see it in you, which helps them to see it in themselves. It’ll take time.”

“I mean, no pressure.”

She laughed. “There really isn’t any pressure. There’s no guarantee they’ll discover it in this lifetime, but by binding your souls to spend future lifetimes together, you’re telling them you’ll be there to help them whenever they’re ready. The one who just discovered he’s like you is the youngest. But seeing you made him brave. What happened last night was the first step. None of us thought he was going to discover his gift this lifetime.”

I felt goosebumps over my entire body when she said that last sentence. My eyes went wide as I looked at her. I could once again see the outline of a pair of wings as she stood next to the bed, smiling down at me. “I work with your father, Sephie,” she said.

“I knew I wasn’t crazy when I saw them the first time!” I said. “I even told Andrei earlier that I felt like you were supposed to be in my life.”

“You’ve always known, Sephie. You sometimes need a reminder to trust yourself, just like he does.”

“Do you see my father regularly?” I asked. She nodded her head. “Will you tell him I miss him?”

“He knows, but I’ll tell him. He still watches you, even though you have Ivan now. He’s very proud of you, Sephie,” she said, squeezing my hand. “I need to take your arm out of the sling again. Should I get your boyfriend and Ivan first?”

“No, it’s manageable now. It still hurts, but I can take it.”

“Just because you can doesn’t mean you should, you know. They want to help you. You know it frustrates them when you don’t let them?” I just looked at her, not knowing what to say. She smiled sweetly at me again. “I know you’re used to being on your own. Used to taking care of everything by yourself. But you’re not by yourself anymore. Even if I didn’t know everything I know, one look at them and I’d be able to tell any one of them would do anything you needed. It’s okay to be completely vulnerable with them. Your boyfriend especially. Your connection is stronger than I’ve ever seen it, but you’re still holding back from him because you’re scared when you’re hurt. It’s not your fault. You’ve been conditioned to be so, but you can let go now. Much like how his anger was causing an imbalance with you, you holding on to your pain will start to cause an imbalance with him. You helped him with his anger. Let him help you with your pain.” She didn’t wait for me to answer, she simply walked out to get Adrik and Ivan.

Adrik walked to the bed on my good side, grabbing my hand. “You feel better each time, solnishko. Soon it won’t hurt so much when your arm comes out of the sling.” He leaned down and kissed my forehead.

ivan walked to the opposite side of the bed, ready to hold my arm once it was taken out of the sling. It hurt much less when he did, if I was being honest with myself. I still felt pain when my arm was free of the sling, but it was much less this time and the needles barely hurt when she stuck them in my shoulder and over my ribs. I could always breathe much deeper when the needles were over my ribs without excruciating pain.

“Can you leave those ones in all the time?” I asked, nodding to the needles over my ribs. “I can breathe so much better when they’re in.”

Ivan immediately got worried. “Are you having trouble breathing, princess?”

“No, not like before. There’s nothing wrong, but it hurts to breathe. I realize you don’t know this, but your ribs, are affected by literally everything. Every movement makes them hurt. Every breath makes them move, which makes them hurt. The deeper the breath, the more they move, the more intense the pain. When the needles are in, I get momentary relief and can take a deep breath. It’s just nice.”

He looked at me sympathetically. “Yeah, I really have no idea how painful broken ribs are. I mean, I’ve broken. plenty of my ribs, but not once did I feel it.”

“I still haven’t decided if you’re lucky or unlucky for your inability to feel pain. Every time I get hurt, I lean hard toward the lucky side, not gonna lie,” I said, smiling at him. The acupuncturist removed the needles from my shoulder, but left the ones over my ribs a little longer since I was clearly enjoying them. I took a few more deep breaths in, just because I could.

Chapter Three Hundred Ten

Sophie

Once all the needles were removed, Ivan was talking quietly with the acupuncturist while Adrik helped me get dressed again. He had brought one of the shirts and a pair of insulated leggings that the guys had picked up while they were out. “We modified the shirt,” he said, holding it up so I could see they cut the sleeve off. “I think it will work.” He slid it over my cast and helped me get it the rest of the way on, then helped with the leggings.

“Do you guys need anything from me this afternoon? Because you have approximately 20 minutes before I’m asleep again. I’m about to be so warm,” I said as he helped me put his sweatshirt back on. He chuckled, leaning over to kiss my forehead. “You can sleep as long as you need to, solnishko.”

We set the meeting with the journalist a few days after he suggested it to give the guys time to watch him. Better to be extra safe right now. “I was correct. Recluses are quite possibly the best people to have to watch. He has the same routine every day. He’s only out of his apartment for precisely 95 minutes each day. He spends the rest of the time inside,” Stephen said.

“Seems boring. Oh wait, that’s me. That’s what I do every day,” I said, laughing.

Adrik clicked his tongue. “You’ll be able to go more places again once this is all over,” he said.

“I wasn’t complaining,” I said. “Although I do miss the gardens and the lake at the house, now that I think of it.”

“Soon, love,” Adrik said.

Viktor’s phone beeped to let him know that Chen was in the lobby. While he left to go fetch him, the rest of us moved down to Adrik’s office. The bruises on my face were much lighter now, so I didn’t feel so self-conscious being seen in public. The bruises on my body were still quite colorful, but they were much easier to hide. I still got a few curious looks from people here and there, but the guys were quick to pick up on it. They just moved in closer around me so people had a harder time seeing me.

“Sephie, you’re looking much better, my girl,” Chen said as he walked in the office.

“Not so colorful anymore,” I said, smiling at him.

“How’s your arm? Still hurts like a sumbitch, huh?”

“Mostly only when it’s out of the sling right now. I can’t tell if it’s getting better or I’m just used to the pain now, but I don’t notice it all the time anymore. The ribs are worse, if I’m being honest. Do not recommend.”

Chen laughed. “Noted.”

We filled Chen in on everything he needed to know to make this meeting believable. I went over the email exchanges with him, so he would be familiar with the conversation we’d had with the journalist so far. We gave him details on Ricardo and Lorenzo that we’d found, so he’d have a working knowledge of the information and could respond quickly.

“If you’re ever not sure of how to answer, just pause like you’re thinking of how to phrase your answer. Look down at your coffee thoughtfully, or watch a person walk by before responding. You’ll be able to hear us in your earpiece, so we can give you the answer you need. Try not to stare at him while you’re listening to us. It’ll make it more obvious you’re being coached on what to say. You want it to come across as a normal conversation. People maintain eye contact, but they also look away periodically in normal conversation. People who are nervous tend to try to maintain too much eye contact. It’s a dead giveaway every time,” Stephen said.

“If he says anything in Italian, I’ll be able to translate, but I told him in the last email that I used translating software so he had to speak English. He might try to speak Italian to gauge whether that was a lie or not,” I said.

“Stephen will have you covered the whole time. We’ll be watching from down the street as well. And you’ll be able to hear us the entire time,” Viktor said.

“Okay. I think I can do this,” Chen said.

“You’ll be fine, Chen. Just try to stay relaxed. And if you feel like something is really off, say the word and we’ll make sure you get out of there as quickly as possible,” Andrei said.

“Yeah, uh, I meant to ask before, who’s idea was it to use mayonnaise as the safe word?” Chen asked, trying not to laugh.

“You really have to ask that question?” I said, laughing.

“I should’ve known,” he said.

“Technically, it was Max that came up with the idea for ridiculous words. I just stole it. Made it my own,” I said, smiling at him as we walked to the elevator to leave.

“Yeah, you know I stopped by the restaurant a day or two ago. He hasn’t figured it out yet, but I know you guys saved that dude’s a*s in the parking lot after work. I don’t know how many times I’ve told him to be more aware of his surroundings, but he’s the dumbest motherf**ker I’ve ever met when it comes to that. No idea how you guys knew what was happening and I’m positive I don’t want to know. I just know it had to be you,” he said.

“You’ll have to let us know if he does ever figure it out. We have a bet pool going on whether it’ll ever happen or not,” I said. I caught Andrei’s eye, smiling widely at him. He seemed like he was doing better after our little talk. I was curious to see what else he was capable of, after my talk with the acupuncturist as well.

We made sure that Chen was the first one to the café so he would be waiting on the journalist to arrive. I gave a description of Chen to the journalist so he would know what to look for. Chen looked relaxed while he waited for the journalist to arrive.

Right on time, the journalist appeared, walking from the direction of his apartment. “Got a visual. He’s on his way, Chen.” The streets around the café were mostly quiet. It was an older part of town, quiet, not as many people to contend with, which worked to our advantage. It gave us a clear view of Chen, which helped put his mind at ease.

The journalist was carrying a briefcase. He walked right to Chen, asking him the question we’d given him. Chen answered with the correct phrase, so each knew the other was the person they were meeting. It was all very much like a spy movie..

The journalist set the briefcase down on the table as he sat down across from Chen. He opened it, getting right to business. He talked quietly, but his English was good. Chen should have no problems understanding him.

“Like I told you in the emails, I’ve been watching this man for years. He’s very connected to very powerful people. But what I’ve recently discovered makes me believe he’s behind all those powerful people he’s connected to.” He paused, looking directly at Chen. “They say this city is run by one man. No one knows who he is or what his name is. I think I do.” He pulled a stack of documents out of his briefcase, pushing them toward Chen.

I glanced nervously at Adrik, gauging his reaction to this guy potentially uncovering who he was. He simply smirked at me and pulled me tighter against him.

The journalist started showing Chen the evidence he’d collected. “All of this, these business deals,” he’d flip through a few more pages, “these bank transactions…they all prove that Ricardo is the man who runs this city,” he said very quietly.

I felt Adrik squeeze me tighter, almost like an “I told you so.”

“The entire city? You think it’s this guy? Like he’s over all the other bosses as well? From what I’ve seen, he’s not even a lower-level boss,” Chen said.

“That’s because that’s what he wants you to think,” the journalist said. “This is why I had to go into hiding. If he knows I found out about this, I would be dead. He’s worked very carefully for years to make it seem like he’s not the one in charge, but I believe he is. We need to get this information to the police. Or the politicians of the city. I know the police commissioner isn’t on the take, but I can’t speak to the rest of the police force. I know there’s at least one politician that might be trustworthy.”

“Tell him you know Henry personally. The police commissioner. You can take the information straight to him,” Adrik said to Chen.

“Henry? The police commissioner? He’s a family friend, actually. He’s like an uncle to me. I can take this information straight to him. I don’t know about the politicians, though. I think by definition, being a politician means you’re on the take,” Chen said.

Chapter Three Hundred Eleven

Sephie

The journalist laughed. “Valid point. I knew you’d be trustworthy. You’re the only one, other than me, that’s searched for the information on these two men in years. I met with one other guy years ago, but I never heard from him again. This was before I’d discovered who Ricardo really was, even. This is dangerous. They’re dangerous men, dealing in a very dangerous world. There are countless stories about the savagery of Lorenzo overseas. Ricardo keeps a lower profile, but he can’t be much better. He’s been deep in business with Lorenzo for at least three decades.”

“I would venture to guess they’re cut from the same cloth,” Chen said, thoughtfully. He picked up the stack of papers. “Is this everything? Do you have more? Henry is a good man, he’ll want everything. He’ll also want to know how the he ll I got myself into this. I’m gonna have to listen to a lecture from my father,” he said, shaking his head.

The journalist laughed again. “I’d appreciate you keeping me anonymous for now.”

“Consider it done. I’ll get this to Henry right away,” Chen said. The journalist stood up, offering his hand to Chen, who also stood at the same time. They parted ways without another word.

We had one of the security guys from the building, who was a normal human size, pick Chen up down the block in a

should the journalist be watching him. He did. He walked a short distance from the café and waited until he saw Chen get in the taxi, then continued on to his apartment.

“You’re a natural at this, Chen,” I said once we were all back at the building. I gave him a quick high-five.

“The fact that I had a sniper over my shoulder made it surprisingly easy to talk to a stranger. Can I borrow him for my next blind date?” he asked.

“I’m not entirely sure you’re grasping the concept of dating,” I said, squinting my eyes at him.

“Presumptuous coming from someone who’s out of the dating pool. It’s anarchy out there, my girl,” he said, laughing.

“The French isn’t working the way it used to?” Misha asked.

Chen laughed loudly. “She told you about that, huh?”

“They’ve heard every conversation we’ve ever had, Chen,” I said. I watched as the lightbulb came on in his head.

“That’s how they always know when someone shows up at the apartment. Oh my God, I can’t believe I didn’t put that one together before right now,” he said.

“See? You’re not just a pretty face,” I said, laughing.

Adrik, who had been laughing at our conversation, extended his hand to Chen. “Thank you for doing this, Chen. Can you come by the office again this week? I have a couple of projects I’m in need of a contractor for. Sephie tells me you have your license.”

Chen’s eyes were the size of saucers as he shook Adrik’s hand. “Yes, sir. Let me know when to be here. I have a small crew, but we do excellent work.”

*Til take a look at my schedule and have Viktor call you to set it up.” Adrik said as we all got on the elevator to go back upstairs. We stopped at the lobby to let Chen off, then continued to the penthouse.

Adrik caught me smiling at him on the way up. He raised his eyebrow at me, saying, “he strikes me as the type to try to refuse money for what he just did for us. Instead of having that awkward conversation, he can do some work on one of my projects and I’ll pay him handsomely for it. He won’t argue then, because his crew is also involved.” I felt the warmth slowly spread over my body as I looked at him. I didn’t say anything. I just stood on my toes and pressed my lips to his.

Once we were in the penthouse, Ivan and Viktor started to look over everything the journalist had given to Chen. They were quiet for a few minutes. Viktor finally looked up. “I’ll give this guy credit, he does have good instincts. From someone on the outside, it would look like Ricardo is toward the top of the business. He just doesn’t know there’s

another level above him.”

Ivan looked at Adrik. “What are your plans for Ricardo?”

“I haven’t decided, honestly. He’s never moved against me directly, so I’m struggling with justifying killing him outright. However, I’m not going to just leave him alone and hope for the best,” he said.

“Let’s say we did take this to Henry. It’s coming up an election year, right? Politicians love to appear tough on crime. We hand them Ricardo, gift-wrapped, they get to pat themselves on the backs and tell everyone how good of a job they’re doing, while no one is paying attention to us,” Ivan said.

“They get the doctor and Ricardo all in the same year. That’s gotta be worth at least two terms for the mayor and the

commissioner,” Stephen said.

“I really feel like we’re single-handedly bringing the city together here, boys,” I said.

Adrik

I woke up the next morning before Sephie, which was becoming the norm. I wrapped my arm around her tighter so she wouldn’t move too fast, kissing her neck gently. She moaned quietly as she started to wake up. I felt her move her good arm on top of mine that was holding her. “What does it say about me that I’m kind of loving you holding me down all the time now?” she said, still fighting to wake up. She coughed quietly, holding her ribs.

“I’ll keep that in mind, love,” I said as I wrapped both arms tighter around her, pulling her back to me as close as possible. She surprised me by rolling onto her back without too much effort. She laughed quietly at the look of

surprise on my face, only to cough once more. This was a new development that I was beginning to worry about.

“I like to see you,” she said, smiling her sweet smile.

“You’re making progress. I think the doctor will be pleased this afternoon,” I said, leaning down to kiss her.

Td like it to go faster,” she said. “There are still things I can’t do that I would very much like to do.” She cut her eyes over at me, chewing on her bottom lip. “And by that I mean you. I’d very much like to do you.”

I caught myself just staring at her in wonderment. She always managed to make me laugh, no matter the situation,

and she always managed to make me love her even more, no matter what she did. “It’s only been two weeks, love. Let’s not talk about how they’ve been the longest two weeks of my life,” I said, grinning at her.

“You and me both,” she said. “It would be so much easier if it weren’t for my ribs. Those things are a major setback.”

“It seems like the pain is less the past couple of days though?” I was still able to feel her pain clearly. While it was still very much present, it was more in the background the last couple of days.

She nodded her head. “You’ve helped.” Her sweet smile once again threatening to stop my heart, as she reached over with her good hand to place her palm against my cheek. I’d been trying to take her pain and turn it into something more pleasurable for her more often. She was starting to get cranky, and rightfully so, because her body hurt so much. The acupuncture helped tremendously, but she was still getting frustrated that she was constantly in pain. Her brain wouldn’t give her a break from it. It’s exhausting to be in constant pain. She was starting to sleep even more than usual, to the point that she was only awake for a couple of hours each day. Even that made her cranky because she felt useless. Her appetite was completely gone, like it was after the attack on her and Misha, which meant she was losing weight again. Even with daily acupuncture, she was a mess.

The words of the acupuncturist were always in my head. “She needs you. She needs Ivan. And she needs the other four waiting outside.” I readily admit it took me too long to figure out what to do, but it seemed like the last few days had finally given her some slight relief. She was showing signs of feeling more herself again, but she still had a long way to

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“It took me too long to figure out what to do, but I’m glad it seems like it’s helping,” I said.

“It’s helping. That’s the important part.”

Chapter Three Hundred Twelve

Adrik

The guys were waiting on us when we walked into the kitchen. They'd been stressed because Sephie had seemingly taken a torn for the worse over the last week, on top of everything else. She never took it out on any of us, but it still affected everyone to see her so cranky. And they were starting to miss her because she basically did nothing but sleep.

“Good morning, princess,” Ivan said as she walked into the kitchen. She was in front of me, so I couldn't see her face, but I knew by the look on Ivan's face that she was smiling at him.

“Super Squish,” she said as she walked to him. She looked around, noticing Stephen wasn't in the kitchen. “He's downstairs getting breakfast. He'll be right back,” Ivan said before she could even ask. They'd banned her from trying to cook until she had the use of both arms. That was one reason why we think she took a turn for the worse. She was trying to do too much and suffered because of it. She wasn't happy with the ban, but she finally relented. After every single one of us scolded her for arguing with us.

“How did you sleep, gazelle?” Misha asked as she made the rounds in the kitchen.

“Like I was dead,” she said, laughing. Andrei handed her a cup of coffee, saying, “this will help bring you back to life.”

Stephen walked back into the penthouse, clearly happy that she was awake. “How's your appetite this morning. Seph?” he asked. “I got you French toast this time. Maybe a sugar high is what you need,” he said, grinning at her.

“That'll keep me awake for 10 extra minutes today,” she said sarcastically. She still hugged him and thanked him for remembering she loved French toast.

She picked at her breakfast, eating some of it, which was progress from the previous few days. She saved the rest of it for later, in case she got hungry again. Really, she was saving it for one of the guys. They would always eat her leftovers at some point.

“When do you meet with the police commissioner?” she asked, chasing around a bite of toast on her plate but not actually eating it.

“Tomorrow. I was waiting to see what Sal did before I met with him. He knows, loosely, what's happening, but I need to fill him in on everything,” I said.

“Who had Sal running on the whiteboard and who had him staying?” she asked, smiling.

Sal had stayed in his house for days after Trino delivered Anthony and Lorenzo to him. Trino had his guys watching Sal the whole time. They could see him inside the house. Like Stephen said, if it wasn't Sal, it would've been @artbreaking. He was definitely in mourning. We were waiting to see what he was going to do next. Trino had offered to take care of Sal. “I'm still pissed he would try to go around me and make a deal with the Mexicans. I'll be happy to take care of him for you,” he said.

“Be my guest, Trino,” I had told him. One less thing I would have to worry about. We had guys watching Niko and Vito as well. Both paid visits to Sal while he was sh ut in his house. Both were shown Trino's special delivery. Both were now afraid for their

own lives.

The people in those three areas of the city were still unhappy and threatening to revolt against the bosses. Even with being terrified for their own lives, they were still trying to collect the new taxes they'd imposed on their people. Massimo's underbosses were still trying to collect taxes in his area. The only quiet areas belonged to Dario and Armando.

Trino was proving to be invaluable to me during this entire situation. I had not expected him to come through the way he was. During one of the short windows when she was awake, I'd talked to Sephie about it.

“I'm not that surprised that he's proving to be as helpful as he is,” she said. I looked at her skeptically. “He knows you trust actions more than words. Because he's very similar to you. You're going to need to return the favor when it comes to the Mexicans when this is over with in the city.”

I could feel her worry starting to build, but she was trying to smile through it. “You shouldn't worry, love. Trino took care of them by himself last time. If we help him, it will be even faster,” I said.

She tried to take as deep a breath as she could. “I know. I still worry. I can't help it.” I could feel her frustration as I pulled her as close to me as possible. We were both missing the ability for me to hold her tightly

That afternoon, Sephie had her two-week check-up with Dr. Williams. He wanted to take another x-ray of her lung, just to make sure everything was still functioning properly. We all went to the hospital with her.

“How's your breathing?” he asked.

“Still not what I'd like it to be, but it's okay,” she said.

“Is it mostly your ribs? Are you feeling like you're not getting enough air?”

“Both, I think? I can't take a deep breath because of my ribs, so it feels like there's not enough air all the time,” she said.

“Hmmm. Let's get you x-rayed. I want to see what's going on in there.”

He had to take her arm out of the sling to be able to see all of her lung. It was painful for her, but not like it was before she left the hospital. I stood to the side and tried to help her with the pain as much as I could. It worked better when I could touch her. She didn't have tears in her eyes this time when I walked back to the table she was lying on. I strapped her arm back in the sling and helped her sit up so we could put my oversize sweatshirt back on her. At least she'd been staying warmer with the clothes we got her through all this.

Dr. Williams told us to wait in the exam room while he looked at her x-rays. He had a concerned look on his face when he walked back into the room.

“Have you been feeling fatigue lately, Sephie?” he asked, sitting on a stool in front of her.

“She's done nothing but sleep the past few days. She's only been awake a few hours each day,” Ivan said. “Literally everything wears her out.”

“She's also lost her appetite again like she did before when she took pain meds,” Misha said.

“She was starting to breathe better after the first days of being at home, but now she's struggling to breathe again like she did when she was still in the hospital,” Andrei said.

Dr. Williams looked to Sephie for confirmation of what they'd all just said. She simply nodded her head in agreement. “Any sharp pains in your chest?” he asked as he put a stethoscope on and listened to her breathing.

“Just my ribs.”

“What about a rapid heart rate?” She shook her head no. He wheeled himself to the cabinet on the opposite side of the room, grabbing a needle and syringe. “You've got fluid building up in your lung again. I'm thinking you're in the beginning stages of pneumonia, but I want to run a blood test to make sure it's pneumonia.” He looked at me, then to each of the guys. “Have you heard her wheezing again when she breathes?”

“No wheezing. She's coughing again occasionally, though. Usually when she tries to talk too much,” Andrei said.

“It's becoming more frequent,” I said.

Dr. Williams took blood from Sephie's right arm, then stood up. “I'm going to put a rush on this so we'll know for sure whether this is pneumonia. I can send her home with antibiotics, but that's not going to make her stomach any happier. If the antibiotics don't begin to resolve it, she's going to need to be admitted again,” he said as he stepped out of the room.

She had tears in her eyes when I looked down at her. “I don't want to go back to the hospital,” she said quietly. I pulled her to me, so her head was resting on my shoulder as I wiped away the tears. She closed her eyes, leaning on me. “I'm so tired of this,” she said so quietly that I almost didn't hear her.

The guys were quiet, not knowing what to say, but clearly worried about her. Sephie sat quietly beside me, with her head on my shoulder until the doctor returned. I thought she might've fallen asleep, but she heard him come in the room and lifted her head from my shoulder.

“The good news is it's pneumonia. That's also the bad news. I'm going to send you home with antibiotics for now, but I want to see you again in seven days to make sure it's not getting worse. If you start to have trouble breathing at any point, you need to come straight here. Your lung is still healing and this could cause it to collapse again.” He looked at all of us, saying, “if you hear her start wheezing again, or she has any sharp pains in her chest, her pulse starts racing, she starts turning blue, or has shortness of breath, bring her here.” We all nodded. “The antibiotics will be easier to handle if you can eat something when you take them. Yogurt is usually a good choice, if you can't manage anything else,” he said, looking back to Sephie. She nodded her head. “On the bright side, your bones look like they're healing well. How's your shoulder feel?”

“It's not as painful when I take it out of the sling now. It still hurts, just less,” she said.

“That will continue to get better. Your ribs look good, but they always take the longest to heal because they're constantly being moved.” He looked at Ivan. “Seven days, bring her back. Don't miss a dose between now and then. We hopefully caught this early enough that it won't progress into something worse that means she has to come back here. Let her rest as much as she needs, but stay diligent about her antibiotic.”

“We'll take care of her,” Ivan said. The doctor stood up to leave the room. I helped Sephie stand up, then reached down and picked her up. I could feel her exhaustion. She didn't protest, she just wrapped her good arm around my shoulders and rested her head against my shoulder and neck as we left the hospital.

Chapter Three Hundred Thirteen

Adrik

She was asleep before we made it back to the penthouse. Once we walked in the door, I walked to one of the couches with her. She didn’t even wake up when I pulled her from the backseat. Viktor read the prescription on the antibiotics. “It says she needs to take this every 8 hours until she’s out of pills,” he said, taking out two pills from the bottle.

“At least we know she’ll be awake three times a day now,” Misha said as he was looking through the refrigerator. He grabbed a carton of yogurt and a spoon and walked them over to me. Andrei had gotten a glass and was filling it with water for her.

She was still sound asleep in my arms. “Sephie, love, you need to wake up,” I said, brushing my hand across her cheek. She started to eventually stir, then opened her eyes. She looked momentarily confused before saying, “I fell asleep again, huh?”

“You were out almost before we left the hospital, princess,” Ivan said, softly.

“You need to take your first dose of antibiotic, gazelle. Then you can go back to sleep if you want to,” Misha said, grinning at her.

She made the move to sit up slowly. I helped her, but she was getting stronger on her own. “I wouldn’t exactly say that I want to go back to sleep, but that seems to be all I can manage right now,” she said, taking the pills from Viktor and the glass of water from Andrei.

“Here’s yogurt so the antibiotics don’t upset your stomach. You don’t need anymore reasons to not eat right now,” Misha said, handing her the carton. She turned up her nose at the yogurt, which made Misha sit on the coffee table in front of her. “Don’t make me do the airplane trick to get you to eat this. Because I will. He was trying to look at her sternly, but he couldn’t keep his smile hidden. He ended up laughing, which made her laugh. “Come on, just a few bites and then I’ll go away,” he said.

She groaned quietly, but ate a few bites before handing it back to Misha, who finished it. We all looked at him as he ate the rest of it. “What? Who doesn’t love yogurt? It’s cherry flavor too. This is the best kind.”

I pulled her back against me once more. “Do you want to go lie down in bed, love? Or stay out here with all of us?”

She thought for a moment. “I don’t want to be alone but I don’t want to keep you trapped on the couch with me either. You guys are gonna have to come up with babysitting shifts. Rotate duties,” she said, smiling.

I couldn’t help but laugh. We’d already discussed that on the ride back from the hospital. She leaned her head back to try and look at me. “Let me guess, you already discussed that option?”

“Maybe,” I said, grinning down at her.

She pulled my arms around her tighter. I immediately felt her mood shift and knew she was going to apologize for keeping me away from work for the last two weeks. “Don’t think about apologizing, Sephie.”

“I like it much better when you guys don’t scold me so much,” she said. I could hear her smiling, so I knew she was teasing.

“Then maybe don’t apologize so much for stuff you shouldn’t apologize for,” Andrei said from the kitchen. I did not expect that from him and couldn’t contain my laughter. Thankfully, neither could Sephie.

“I’m regretting that pinky swear right about now,” she said quietly so only I could hear.

“He’s not wrong, love. And you know he’s not wrong,” I said with my lips against her ear, brushing my facial hair against her cheek and neck.

“That’s why it hurts right here,” she said dramatically, pointing to her chest, right over her heart.

The following afternoon, I had a meeting with the police commissioner. Sephie and I had discussed her being there for the meeting before she went back to the doctor and found out she had pneumonia. I wanted her to stay in the penthouse, but she was trying to convince me that she could still make it.

“I slept the entire night and half the day already. I can manage to stay awake for at least an hour while you meet with him. You said you wanted me there to make sure he wasn’t hiding anything. I can still do that. I don’t even have to talk,” she said.

Ivan looked between her and I. “Boss, as much as I hate to agree with her right now, I think she’s right. If we’re going to try to pin everything on Ricardo, we need to make sure that Henry is with us. It’s probably going to mean that she’ll sleep until tomorrow, but we kind of need her for this meeting.”

“That’s why Squish is my favorite,” she said, crossing her one useful arm across her chest for emphasis.

I had to admit that I also agreed with Ivan, but I hated the thought of putting Sephie through the meeting when I knew she didn’t feel well. She had taken a turn for the worse because she was trying to do too much too soon. I was worried this would set her back even further.

“He’s coming here, right?” she asked.

“Yeah, nobody liked the idea of Boss going to the police precinct,” Viktor said.

“I can’t argue with that either. Then I just have to go downstairs for like an hour. Two at most. Then right back up here to pass. out again for days on end. At least let me have a change of scenery for the two hours I’m awake right now,” she said.

I sighed. “You tell me if you start to feel tired or worse, got it?” I looked at her as sternly as possible, which wasn’t much.

“I promise,” she said. “I’ll just give Ivan the signal. He can carry me back up here without you having to stop your meeting.” She paused for a moment, grinning. “Just as long as you promise me you’ll make up some fantastical excuse as to why I had to leave. I will also accept something nonsensical, like “no one can escape their destiny.””

“That makes me want to take you out of the middle of the meeting whether you need to leave or not, princess,” Ivan said, laughing.

“Do antibiotics usually work this fast? Because it seems like you’re feeling a little better already, Seph,” Stephen said.

“I’m not sure, but whatever keeps me from having to go back to the hospital, I’m all for,” she said.

Before we went down to my office for the meeting with the police commissioner, I had a few moments alone with Sephie while I helped her change into something other than my sweatshirt and a pair of leggings.

“I hope nothing is riding on me looking extra professional today,” she said, grinning at me as I cut the sleeve off one of her long-sleeve shirts so she could wear it.

“I would really worry about the state of the world if it was,” I said, smirking at her. As much as I hated to admit it, I was happy she was going to be in the meeting with me. I was still worried about her, but I couldn’t deny that I valued her opinion of Henry. I’d always had a good relationship with him, but after everything that had happened, I was questioning every single working relationship I had. I wouldn’t trust anyone that didn’t get the okay from Sephie first.

“How long have you known Henry?” she asked as I helped her pull on a pair of jeans. She was getting much better at putting her leggings on, but the jeans were tighter and proving to be difficult for her with only one arm and broken ribs.

“He’s been commissioner for almost four years now. The mayor appointed him when he was elected. They’re basically both running for re-election. If the mayor is re-elected, then Henry stays in. His position isn’t guaranteed if a new mayor is elected,” I said.

“So, this deal with Ricardo would look good for the mayor and would help him get elected for a second term?”

“That’s what we’re hoping they’ll think. There are some people in the city that know about me and can recognize me, but there are many that have no idea I exist. They just know that things are not good in their area and want a solution. If the mayor can package this up as a sweeping reform on crime, the people will gladly vote him in for a second term,” I said, helping her with her shirt as well. I gathered her hair up and lifted it off her neck so I could kiss the back of her neck. “Are you sure you’re going to be warm enough in just this?”

Chapter Three Hundred Fourteen

Adrik

She handed me her sling so I could help her strap her arm back in. I'm trying to be cold on purpose. It'll help keep me awake," she said, grinning at me. I clicked my tongue at her, to which she responded by making her eyes go dark.

I cursed under my breath. "That is not playing fair," I said as I pulled her as tight against me as I could. I leaned down and kissed her passionately, trying to make her knees go weak. My tongue didn't give her the choice to deny me entry into her mouth. Not that she would have anyway. Even though I was trying to make her knees go weak, I was still fighting against my desire to completely devour her. When I felt her falter, I deepened the kiss for a moment more until she moaned not so quietly against my lips.

She stepped back from me, a little more out of breath than I thought she would be. "You win," she said, still trying to catch her breath. It took her longer to catch her breath than it should have, which worried me. "I'm okay," she said in between breaths. "Just let me sit for a second." I helped her to the edge of the bed, kneeling in front of her. She didn't let go of my arm while she worked to catch her breath.

"I'm sorry, solnishko. I didn't mean for this to happen. What can I do?"

She grinned at me. "I started it." She looked down at my worried expression, her smile widening. "I'm okay. I promise. It's just difficult to catch my breath right now," she said, her palm resting against my cheek. "Doesn't mean I didn't enjoy the hell out of that though."

I cursed under my breath again, standing in front of her. "Can you walk? I can carry you downstairs. I think I should carry you after I almost made you pass out," I said, pulling her up in front of me. I didn't wait for her to argue, I just bent down and scooped her up. "I'll be happy when you can eat again. You're getting skinny again. You're going to be all sharp soon," I said as I walked us down the hallway.

The guys were all somewhat concerned when I carried her out of the bedroom. "It's okay. I might've gotten carried away and almost made her pass out. The least I can do is carry her while she catches her breath," I said, somewhat sheepishly. I heard several chuckles behind us while we walked to the door. Sephie hid her face against my neck so she wouldn't have to see them grinning at me.

The police commissioner was prompt, walking into my office exactly on time. "Henry," I said, as I stood to shake his hand. Viktor, who had escorted him up, stayed by the door after he closed it. The rest of the guys were already in the office. Henry looked to all of them, nodding. He spotted Sephie behind me. She was already on the cabinet behind my desk. "You must be Sephie. I've heard quite a bit about you," he said, smiling warmly at her.

She slowly started to get off the cabinet. Ivan saw her and went to help her stand up. She walked over slowly, extending her hand to Henry. "I don't know what you've heard, but hopefully it's not all bad."

"Quite the contrary. Vinny's happens to be one of my favorite places for lunch. Both he and his wife can't say enough good things about you. Or him, for that matter," he said, gesturing toward me.

She smiled widely at the mention of Vinny and Anna. "They're wonderful people. My stomach is in a long-term relationship with his sandwich shop."

Henry laughed. I motioned for him to sit while I helped Sephie back up on the cabinet behind my desk. I tried to move a chair there for her, but she said she preferred to sit on the cabinet. She said most people forgot she was back there, so she could watch them without them being completely aware she was doing so.

"So, tell me, what's this important that we actually needed to meet in person?" Henry asked.

"I know you're aware of some of what's been happening, but you need to know the full story. I also have somewhat of a solution for the situation that I think you and the mayor will be happy with," I said.

"I know about the brawn situation and the doctor finally being captured, both of which I'm grateful to you for taking care of. I've been hearing rumors of some of the bosses raising taxes in their areas of the city. Does it have to do with that?"

I nodded. "It's larger than that. The bosses made a move to overthrow me. Lorenzo has been looking for a way back to the city. The attempted coup was his way back. Salvadori was behind most of it, although every single boss is guilty of going along with it."

"Which means what for the other bosses? That can't be sitting well with you."

"It's not. It means I'm getting rid of all of them. Lorenzo is already taken care of. Armando, Dario, and Massimo are too. The other three will be shortly."

Henry thought for a moment. "Are you replacing them, then?"

"Not exactly. I don't need them. I've never needed them."

Henry's jaw tensed as he considered what this meant for the city. I heard Sephie say quietly in Russian, "he thinks that's too much power for one person. He's worried you'll become a tyrant."

"There's another player behind the bosses as well. I have enough evidence that makes it look like he's the one that's been running the city for years so that he can easily be tried and jailed, making it appear as though you and the mayor are being extremely tough on crime. Once the other bosses are taken care of, the increased taxes they've imposed go away. I've never been a fan of high taxes. The people know that. I would much rather they keep their money and invest it back in their community. That will become the norm once I take care of the bosses. I continue to run the city behind the scenes as I've been doing for the past ten years. Crime returns to the lower rates. Everything goes back to the way it was a couple years ago before the bosses started to get greedy. I have plenty of money. I don't see a reason to needlessly raise taxes on hard-working people. That won't change."

"This other player who is it?"

"Ricardo De Luca."

"No shit?" Henry said, clearly shocked.

"You know him?"

"He's been slipping out of our grasp for years now. He was instrumental in setting up a pipeline for Lorenzo's human trafficking before your father banished him. He resurfaced years later as a supposed legitimate businessman. One of my detectives has been watching his deals with Armando in the city. We could never get him on anything substantial, so there was never a reason to look further into his finances, etc.," he said.

"Until now," Ivan said. He stood up and handed Henry the stack of papers that the journalist had given Chen.

"Where did you get this?" Henry asked, looking through the pages. "Holy shit. This is what we've been wanting to find."

"The source wishes to remain anonymous. I will say, however, that he's a very thorough source. You'll find everything you need there to make an arrest," I said.

Henry continued to look through the papers, but eventually stopped. He looked up to me. "I need to talk to the mayor, of course. I can't make this decision on my own. Although, it's going to be difficult for him to ignore Ricardo once he sees this.

You've always been great at working with us instead of against us. The people of the city are happy that you stopped the brawn operation. The media had a field day with that one. Those who know you, love you. Those who don't know you, loved the peace you brought when you took over."

"None of that will change," I said.

He stood up, which meant I stood up as well. He still looked thoughtful. Ivan moved to help Sephie stand up so she could stand beside me. She asked quietly, "the mayor is getting money from the other bosses, isn't he?"

Henry's jaw dropped. "How…?"

"Lucky guess. You genuinely want to work with us, but you're nervous about something. It's not anything on our end. We just gift-wrapped a guaranteed re-election for the mayor, which would mean another appointment for you. The only reason that would come into question is if he's getting money from the other bosses. If his loyalties lie with them, he's going to want to come after us rather than Ricardo. You're caught in the middle and you're wondering which side to choose," she said.

Henry sat back down, still stunned that she knew what she knew. "No one knows about the mayor for sure. He's done a great job of keeping it very discreet, but there was a hefty amount of money pumped into his campaign from a non-existent corporation. Since he took office, he's had unexplainable influxes of cash several times. The problem is, we can never prove anything."

"Who's running against him in this election? Maybe this information needs to go to that person instead," Ivan said.

"I think that candidate is even worse than the current mayor," Henry said.

"What about you?" Sephie asked.

Henry looked up at her, not understanding what she meant. "What about me?"

"You run for mayor. You expose the current mayor and the other candidate in your campaign. We get rid of the other bosses. The city thrives. Seems simple to me," she said.

She made a great point. Henry was well-liked, both among the police as well as the people of the city. He'd started great. programs during his time as commissioner.

"But I…I wouldn't know the first thing about being a mayor," he said.

"And you really think the current mayor did? They're called advisors for a reason, Henry," she said, smiling at him.

Chapter Three Hundred Fifteen

Sephe

I did manage to make it through the entire meeting with Henry, even though it lasted well past two hours. However, it did mean that I slept for a full 24 hours after it was over. I was only awake long enough to take my antibiotic and then I'd pass out once more.

Because of my brilliant idea during the meeting with Henry, the guys were now working around the clock to find information linking the current mayer to any of the other bosses or Ricardo, Ivan was going through the information given to us from the journalist again to see if he could find any connection between Ricardo and the mavo

Henry had agreed to give us a little time to see what we could find before taking the information to the mayor. He was considering a run for mayor; it depended on the information we could find. Henry was a mostly good person, but his title took priority over almost everything else. While it's a valid argument that he could do more as police commissioner than he would be able to as a regular citizen, he was still willing to sit on information that would put away a very evil person just to ensure he kept his position for four more years. At some point, remaining in the grey area will come back to haunt you. We, however, knew that even if he sat on the information we provided, Ricardo would still get everything he deserved. Just not pu blicly.

The guys really did work out a shift schedule for babysitting me while I slept off having to be awake for more than 20 minutes. They tried to leave me alone, but I started mumbling and shaking after a few minutes, so that option was out the window.

“It wasn't so bad, spider monkey. It was nice to have a guaranteed nap every few hours,” Andrei said after I finally woke up and they were filling me in on everything I'd missed.

“How did Stephen's undead body temperature not wake me up?” I asked, completely surprised.

It almost did the first time. I used an electric blanket the second time. It fooled you,” he said, grinning at me.

“This is the kind of important knowledge that one collects from centuries on this planet,” I said.

“You at least look slightly better, princess,” Ivan said.

“I do feel better. I think the antibiotic is working. I don't feel like death. I still can't breathe as well as I'd like to, but it's not as bad either,” I said.

“What about your appetite

Misha asked..

I thought for a minute. I didn't ha te the idea of food, but it wasn't exciting either. “Still undecided, but I don't ha te the idea anymore.”

“Baby steps,” Misha said, grinning at me.

“Your ribs and shoulder aren't as painful, at least. We moved you several times and you never woke up,” Viktor said. “That's progress.”

“You did?”

Adrik smiled at “I moved you to the bed at night, then back out here during the day. We had to move you slightly each time the guys would switch. You slept through it all.”

“Did you give me any superprofen when you gave me the antibiotic?”

They all shook their heads no. “We never actually thought about that,” Viktor said.

I laughed. “I'm not complaining. I'm just surprised I didn't feel that. Apparently, I was dead to the world.”

Misha walked over to me, with another carton of yogurt. “It's not time yet for your antibiotic, but you haven't eaten anything in almost two days. You need to eat something, gazelle. Whether you want to or not.”

“You're not the boss of me,” i said as I took the spoon from him and took a bite, trying not to laugh. “What did you guys find on the mayor while I

was out?”

ivan sighed. “We've found a few connections to some of Ricardo's business associates, but nothing that tie them directly. We also can't find anything from any of the other bosses yet.”

“Let's ask the journalist,” I said, in between bites, still under the very watchful eye of Misha. I couldn't tell if he was watching me to make sure I ate or watching to see when I'd give him the rest.

We recruited Chen once more to have a conversation with the journalist. This time about the mayor and whether he knew anything about any ties to Ricardo or any of the other bosses. Chen was noticeably more relaxed this time when I called to ask him if he would be willing to meet with the journalist.

“Yeah, I'll totally do that. It might be concerning how much I enjoyed lying to that dude's face,” he said, laughing.

“We just unlocked a new life goal for you, didn't we?” I asked, trying to hold in my laughter so it wouldn't make me cough.

We set up a meeting at the same café for the following afternoon. Adrik was once again concerned it would be too much for me. “I only just got you back from the last meeting. Now you're going to sleep for an entire day again,” he said that night when we were alone. I felt his mood shift when he said it. He was legitimately sad at the thought of me sleeping for an entire day again if I went to the meeting.

“I can feel your sadness,” I said, almost surprised by it.

“I've missed you,” he said, without hesitation. I hadn't thought about how difficult this had been on him. Not only was he still working through me and Ivan being taken, but he also had to deal with me not being able to do much on my own since coming home and having the extra worry of trying to take care of me when he knew exactly how much pain I was in all the time.

I thought for a moment as he helped me undress so I could put his shirt on for the night. “What if we sent Keith and Chris instead? I was only needed for the Italian possibility, but he knows Chen doesn't speak Italian, so it won't be an issue this time. Viktor and Ivan can feed him all the information about the mayor to tell the journalist.”

Adrik stood in front of me, his s*xy smirk on his face as he buttoned up his shirt. “You're not going to argue about going?” he asked as he leaned down to press his lips gently to mine.

“I mean, I can if you want me to. But I know how difficult this has all been for you. There's a very good possibility that going along would make me sleep for another day, or longer. Doesn't seem worth it, really,” I said, pulling his arm around my waist with my one functioning arm. “And to be honest, I'm very tired of doing nothing but sleeping.”

“We'll ask Misha what he thinks about it tomorrow,” he said as he gently pushed me back toward the bed.

“I think you should ask Andrei, too,” I said as he helped me into bed. He raised his eyebrow at me, wanting more of an explanation. “It was Andrei that stopped Max from dying. Misha wasn't kidding when he said he never would've thought to look for Tori or Max if Andrei hadn't brought it up. I wouldn't have either. I hadn't thought about Max in weeks.” I paused to take a few breaths, as talking too much was causing me to cough more lately. “The acupuncturist told me he was like me, too. I want to see what he can do.”

“Andrei's like you? How? Like his observation skills?”

“Those are the beginning. She said he'll soon figure out that he knows things before they happen. Like my ability to pret Trino's methods for revenge. Andrei should be able to do that too. Or something similar.”

“He has been much more observant lately. He's been right every single time, too.”

“I told him that. He's still insecure about it. He doesn't trust himself completely yet,” I said. I was lying on my good side, like normal, with Adrik behind me, his arms around me as tightly as possible. It took exactly two more minutes and I was sound asleep again.

“Is Andrei getting breakfast this morning?” Adrik asked as we walked into the kitchen the next morning. Ivan nodded his head, as he pulled me to him to hug me good morning.

“Good morning, princess,” he said, kissing the top of my head.

“Squish,” I said, hiding my face in his chest. “Why do I not want to wake up when all I've done is sleep for the last week?”

His laughter made his chest vibrate, which made my nose itch. “You need it, princess. You've had a lot to deal with lately. It also doesn't help that you won't eat very much. Your body is tired from trying to heal and you won't give it any fuel,” he said, his giant arms holding me gently.

“But food makes me nauseous, I want to eat. Believe me, I do. But every time I do I feel like I'm going to pu ke afterward. Sometimes the nausea happens when I think about eating.” I said. “It's not fair.”

Andrei walked back in with breakfast. “What's not fair?” he asked.

“That I can't eat right now because it all makes me nauseous,” I said, grumpily,

“What about drinking? Does that make you nauseous?” Andrei asked.

“Not that I've noticed.”

Andrei looked to Viktor. “We should stop and get her bone broth while we're out today. Or we can make her some. My grandmother used to make it. She showed me how. It'll be easy for her to drink, but it should help the lack of food for the last week or so and might kickstart her appetite again.”

Adrik caught my eye, a small smile on his face. “Andrei, what are your thoughts about Sephie and I staying here today? I'm worried it will be too much for her if she goes and she'll end up sleeping for an entire day again.”

“You should ask Misha that question,” Andrei said.

“But I'm asking you,” Adrik said, somewhat firmly so Andrei would know not to brush him off a second time. I was watching Andrei, but I caught Misha's eye. He knew what we were up to, giving me a quick wink. Andrei was almost flustered at trying to figure out how to answer the question.

“Don't overthink it, Andrei, or you're going to get in your own way. What does your gut tell you?” Misha said. I walked quietly over to Andrei and grabbed his hand. It worked for Misha, maybe it will work for Bubba.

He took a deep breath when I grabbed his hand and thought for a minute. He looked at Adrik and said, “she should stay here. Her lung is slowly getting better, but she still feels like total shi t, despite what she's telling us.”

Adrik raised his eyebrow, looking straight at me. His wide smile slowly crept across his face as he knew I was likely regretting telling him to ask Andrei's thoughts on whether I should go or stay. I wasn't expecting Andrei to completely out me like that. I just laughed. There wasn't much else I could do. He was right. Everyone knew he was right.

Adrik walked to me, pulling me gently to him. He was still trying not to laugh, but he was clearly amused at what had just happened. “Looks like you're staying here with me, solnishko,” he said, as he kissed my temple. “Maybe more often than you'd like.” He finally laughed as I poked him in his

ribs.

Chapter Three Hundred Sixteen

Sephle

Adrik asked Andrei to stay behind while everyone else went with Chen. He knew I'd want more time alone with Andrei, but I think Adrik was also curious to see what Andrei's newly discovered gift was about as well, especially given that he so easily read me that morning.

For the first time since I'd come into their lives, I saw Andrei nervous about staying behind with me. "Bubba, don't be nervous," I said, trying not to laugh at him. He was still sitting at the kitchen island, so I walked slowly to him, sliding my arm around his shoulders. He grabbed my wrist, bolding onto my arm. He gave me a sideways glance. He's definitely nervous.

Adrik might've been enjoying his nervousness. He was standing on the other side of the kitchen, arms crossed over his chest. He watched me try to calm Andrei down, finally saying, "how long have you been noticing these things?"

"Not long. Really since the night we saved Max. Tori popped into my head the day or two before that night and I couldn't get her out of my head. I've not thought about her since the day she got fired, really. I mean, we saw her that one day when Glana wanted to go shopping. Well, Misha saw her. I didn't see her. Mentions of her here and there after that, but other than that, I never thought about her. It was weird that I thought of her and couldn't get her out of my head," he said.

"Did you feel like something was wrong when you thought about her?" Adrik asked.

"Yeah. It wasn't the same as Misha's impending doom, but something didn't feel right. Same as when Sephie grabbed my hand today when I was thinking about her going to the meeting with the journalist."

What about the rest? About her lung healing and her still feeling like shi t?"

"That just popped into my head. I said it before I really thought much about it, Andrei said. He glanced at me, apologetically.

"Don't be sorry, Bubba. You're right. I do feel like shi t still," I said, smiling at him. "But that's the way it works for me. I've learned that when something pops into my head like that, it's usually because the other person is thinking it but doesn't want to say it. That's how it seems like I can read your mind all the time. It's only different with Adrik," I said.

"How is it different with him?" Andrei asked.

"With the rest of you, it's usually something you need brought to light, if you will. It's an issue that you need help dealing with. But if you're not thinking about it or struggling with it, I don't necessarily pick up on it. I might be able to if I made an effort, but I don't like to pry. With Adrik, it's everything. I just have to look at him for a few seconds and I know what he's thinking. Like when he gave Giana shi t over accusing me of being on drugs. It wasn't the same as when I see things with Misha, but I got a recap of what happened. Enough to know what went on," I said. "He's able to do it to me more now, too. It seems like the more time passes, the more connected we are."

"She's still much better at it than I am, clearly. Since I believed her when she said she was starting to feel better," Adrik said. He squinted his eyes at me like he was still somewhat irritated with me.

"It wasn't a complete lie. I do feel some better. I just still feel like shi t overall. But slightly better shi t," I said.

"Viktor said he was going to get you bone broth. That should help. Not eating isn't helping you out right now," Andrei said.

"I'll consider a feeding tube if that doesn't work. She's going to get all sharp and pointy again. I'm very delicate," Adrik said, grinning at me.

"I'm ruining all of Bubba's hard work training me. He's going to have to start completely over with me by the time I get out of this cast and my ribs heal enough that I can do anything strenuous."

"That's what I like to call 'job security," Andrei said.

The other guys got back a few hours later from Chen's latest meeting with the journalist. I felt Adrik hold me tighter before he lightly brushed his fingertips over my cheek to wake me up. "Wake up, solnishko. They're back and it's time for your antibiotic," he said quietly.

"Shocking. I fell asleep again," I said, sarcastically. Adrik helped me up from the couch.

"How did it go?" Adrik asked as we walked slowly to the kitchen.

"Chen really is quite good at pretending to be someone else," Stephen said. "I don't know why he thinks dating is hard."

"The thought of boobies makes most men incapable of forming complete thoughts. Women instinctively know this, so they put them on display. It's downhill from there, really," I said.

"That seems legit," Stephen said.

"The journalist didn't have much information on the mayor, but he said he was going to look into him to see what he could find. He was under the impression that the mayor was clean, but he also said he hadn't looked into him much. Since he was the one that appointed Henry, he assumed the mayor would also be upstanding," Ivan said.

"He might've been when he was first elected. Or might've been trying harder to be. If he took campaign money from one of the bosses, it would've been hard to get away from that," Adrik said.

"Would he know he took money from one of the bosses?" I asked, my half-empty glass of water in my hand. Adrik walked to me, grabbed the glass, finished it, then refilled it for me.

"It's possible he didn't know. Henry said it came from a non-existent corporation. On paper, it would've looked like a large donation from a company," Viktor said.

"That's how they get politicians in their pockets, princess," Ivan said. "They make it look legit at first, then once they've already accepted the money, they reveal where the money actually came from. They've already accepted it, so it already looks bad. Then the bosses have their guy."

"Rude," I said.

"But effective," Viktor said.

Misha and Andrei had been busy warming up bone broth while the rest of us talked. Misha ordered me to sit while Andrei put a small bowl of broth in front of me. "It might still be too hot, so be careful," he said, as he set the bowl in front of me.

I looked at it for a minute, which made Misha say, "I will airplane it. Don't tempt me."

"You're still not the boss of me," I said, picking up the spoon.

"The bigger question is which one of the bosses has the mayor in his pocket. Or if it really is Ricardo," Stephen said.

"It's interesting that Ricardo seems to have so much influence without being well-known and without being a boss himself," Andrei said. He and Misha both were basically standing over me to make sure that I ate at least part of the bowl of broth. Nothing like feeling like a child to stimulate your appetite.

"Not everyone is interested in recognition," Adrik said, a small smirk on his face. "But I find it interesting that the other bosses allowed him to have this much influence."

"Do you think it was because of his ties to Lorenzo?" I asked, diligently taking sips of the broth so the Wonder Twins wouldn't yell at me.

"Possibly. I think it's worth seeing what we can get out of Armando about it. Dario might know something as well, but I don't want to talk to him without Sephie," Adrik said. "Did the journalist give any indication of when he'd have more information?"

"He seemed to think he'd be able to find something quickly if there was something to be found, but it could've been his ego talking," Ivan said. "He's supposed to let us know when he finds something."

"We'll see what we can get out of Armando tonight. It's been a few days since I've been down there. He might miss me," Adrik said.

Chapter Three Hundred Seventeen

Sephle

I looked at Misha and Andrei when everyone else left to go “talk” to Armando. “We are not allowed to do anything weird that will cause them to come running back upstairs this time.”

While they both laughed at me, Misha asked, “do you not like it when Boss comes out of nowhere to save you?”

“No, I do. I very much do. But I feel bad for always interrupting his schedule,” I said. We were in the kitchen, as Andrei had talked me into more broth. It was actually working. I managed to eat most of the first bowl he gave me when they first got back from the meeting with the journalist and I only slept for a short period that afternoon.

“You know you’re more important than his schedule, spider monkey. He’s told us all exactly that. Multiple times,” Andrei said, setting down another small bowl of broth in front of me.

“I know, but it still doesn’t mean I should constantly interrupt him. This needs salt,” I said, taking a small sip.

Misha’s handsome smile stretched across his face. “That means your appetite is waking up, gazelle.” He grabbed the salt and handed it to me.

“I thought it meant this was bland,” I said, grinning at him.

“What did Boss say about Andrei’s newly discovered ability?” Misha asked, curiously.

“He mostly wanted to know how long I’ve been able to do it. He seemed more amused that I outed Sephie than anything.” Andrei said, still giving me an apologetic look.

I laughed softly. “Don’t apologize, Andrei. It makes him angry that I try to keep it from him when I don’t feel well. He’s still mad at me for keeping it hidden after Misha and I were attacked. Same for the ball. I clearly need help in that area.”

“Ivan lectured him on being mad at you for that, you know,” Misha said.

“He did?”

“Yeah, it was after you got home from the hospital. When he could feel your pain. He was happy that you wouldn’t be able to hide it from him anymore. We could hear it in his voice when he made a comment about you always trying to hide it. Ivan told him it wasn’t your fault,” Misha said.

“It’s not? Pretty sure I’m the one that’s constantly trying to hide it. I know I’m doing it. I just don’t know how to stop,” I said, pushing the now empty bowl away from me.

Andrei picked up the bowl to wash it. He said, “you really don’t know, spider monkey?” I shook my head no.

“No, it’s just something I feel like I have to do. No idea why. And no idea how to stop it.”

“It’s a trauma response, gazelle. You’ve learned that you’re better off not asking for help when you need it because the few times you did got you hurt worse. You might not be aware you’re doing it, but there’s some part of you that’s still trying to protect you, especially when you’re hurt. It’s why you get extra argumentative with us when we try to do stuff for you and why you try to hide it from Boss when you’re hurt. You’re still scared you’re going to get hurt worse,” Misha said.

I thought for a moment, chewing on my bottom lip. “Ivan really said all that?” I asked. They both nodded their heads. I took in a slow, almost deep breath. “He’s been hanging around Stephen. Obviously,” I said, grinning at them.

“He’s right though,” Andrei said, drying his hands on the kitchen towel. He threw the towel back on the counter and walked around the island to stand next to me. His giant arm slid around my shoulders. “It might still take you a while to fully believe it, but you’re safe with us. No matter what. You’ll always be safe with us,” he said. I leaned my head onto his shoulder, taking another almost deep breath. “I know that. I really do. And I love you all for it. I don’t know why I can’t stop trying to pretend I’m okay when I’m clearly not,” I said.

“You don’t have to figure it out, gazelle. I kinda like when you’re extra spicy and cranky,” Misha said. Andrei helped me up so we could move to the couches. He laughed at Misha, but said quietly, “I think we all do. You’re extra hilarious when you’re cranky.”

Adrik was clearly surprised when he walked back into the penthouse and I was still awake, laughing with Misha and Andrei about something ridiculous that we’d come up with. He walked to me, kneeling down in front of me, his face immediately softening when he looked at me. “You’re still awake,” he said, almost like he couldn’t believe it.

“I’m pretty sure Andrei spiked the broth with caffeine,” I said, smiling at him.

He looked at Andrei. “You got her to eat more?” Andrei nodded his head: “She ate all of it this time,” Andrei said.

“Downside, they had to help me up like 12 times so I could pee, but otherwise, I think it’s helping.” I said, laughing quietly. “And just in time, too. I might murder him if the doctor tells me I have to go back to the hospital tomorrow.”

“Nobody wants that, princess,” Ivan said.

Andrei looked at his watch. “It’s been a couple of hours since she ate the last bowl and it’s time for her antibiotic. Think you could manage some more, spider monkey?”

“As long as I can put salt in it. It tastes so much better that way,” I said. Andrei stood up to go to the kitchen while Adrik helped me up from the couch. “How did it go with Armando? Was he happy to see you?” I asked, grinning at Adrik.

Before he answered, he pulled me to him and pressed his lips to mine. “I’m so happy you’re still awake, solnishko,” he said quietly so only I could hear.

“I think he was happy that he could finally see out of both of his eyes again, Ivan said. “I might’ve ensured that happiness was short-lived.” He had a devious grin on his face as he looked at me.

“Squish. Everyone knows you don’t punch like a weak girl. You didn’t have to prove it,” I said, laughing at him.

“Was he any kind of helpful about Ricardo?” Misha asked.

“Only after Stephen made him want to cry,” Viktor said, also with a devious grin on his face. I looked at Stephen, my mouth open in shock. He just shrugged his shoulders. “He had it coming. It’s not my fault he hasn’t dealt with his childhood.”

I caught Adrik’s eye as he helped me sit at the kitchen island yet again. I could see the “I told you” running through his mind.

“What did you find out?” Andrei asked, sliding another bowl of broth in front of me, along with my antibiotic, and a glass of water.

“It seems that Ricardo thinks of himself as an equal to Boss. It looks like he’s the real reason for the coup, not Sal. Ricardo has never been able to gain as much power and favor as Boss has in the city and it drives him crazy. He’s been trying to simply outdo Boss in business for years, but has never been able to come close. That’s when he started trying to get politicians and police in his pocket,” Ivan said.

“Outdo you how?” I asked, sipping the warm broth. I had to admit, I was starting to really like it. It didn’t make me nauous and my stomach was finally happy after so many days of not eating.

“Apparently, he’s been in competition with me for years. I had no idea. Armando said that Ricardo took it personally every time he would try to make a move in a business deal and either I was there first or I had an even bigger project in the works. It’s not my fault he’s shit at business,” Adrik said, shrugging his shoulders. He had a sly smirk on his face, which told me he was clearly enjoying this new piece of information.

“Your greatness will always irritate those who aren’t willing to work as hard as you do,” I said. “Did Armando know how Ricardo got the other bosses to go against you?”

“No, but we didn’t ask that question either. I think that question is best put to Dario,” Stephen said.

“Maybe I’ll be better enough that you can talk to him tomorrow,” I said, pushing the empty bowl away from me. Misha grabbed it to wash it this time.

“One day at a time, love. We’ll see how you are after you see the doctor tomorrow,” Adrik said, kissing my temple.

Chapter Three Hundred Eighteen

Sephle

“We can just call the doctor. We don’t have to go all the way back to the hospital,” I said, knowing full well I was not going to get out of having to go back to the doctor this morning. “Andrei can call him. He’ll tell him my lung is doing better.” I had a mischievous smile on my face, trying to see how they’d react to me being bratty about going to the hospital.

“You do feel better this morning, spider monkey. That’s not a lie for once,” he said, grinning at me.

“See? No need to go to the hospital. Dr. Bubba told me I was okay,” I said.

Adrik smiled at me, instead of being frustrated like I thought he was going to be. “You’re still going, but it makes me happy that you’re feeling better, solnishko. Yesterday was the first day you were awake for more than two hours in over a week.”

“It was a big day. Andrei’s a genius,” I said, laughing when his cheeks flushed.

“No arguments from me,” Adrik said. “I’m happy he found something that helped. I was beginning to have abandonment issues.” He smiled widely at me, causing the warmth to spread over my entire body.

“We all were,” Ivan said.

The trip to the doctor was much easier this time. Not only was I starting to be able to breathe better, finally, but my shoulder was starting to hurt less when it had to be taken out of the sling. The x-ray wasn’t nearly as painful this time.

“I have good news this time around,” Dr. Williams said as he walked into the exam room. “Your lung looks much clearer this time.”

“She’s finally feeling better, but it took until yesterday for her to start to really make improvements,” Ivan said. “Yesterday was the first day she was awake for more than a few hours.”

“How’s your appetite now?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Still not as good as it should be, but she’s been able to keep bone broth down the last two days,” Andrei said.

“That’s a good option. Unfortunately, I want you to continue the antibiotics for another 7 days, which isn’t going to help your stomach. Yogurt helps, broth is great, basically whatever you can stomach, but you need to eat. I can clearly see that you’ve lost weight since the last time I saw you,” the doctor said. He had a chastising tone to his words.

I sighed. “I know. Trust me, I’d rather eat.”

“It’s not her fault. She has a very sensitive stomach,” Andrei said, protectively.

“I can write you a prescription for an appetite stimulant,” Dr. Williams said.

“No thank you. It’ll probably just make me more nauseous. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but things tend to react the opposite of how they’re supposed to with me. I’d rather not,” I said.

Dr. Williams chuckled. “You need food to help your body heal. At this point, a candy bar is going to be beneficial for you. Eat,” he said, looking at me sternly.

Adrik could feel my anger at being chastised by the doctor. I realize he was concerned for my well-being, but he clearly wasn’t understanding that I wanted to eat, but couldn’t and I wasn’t in the mood to be lectured by him. Adrik reached across my lap, almost like he was trying to push me behind him. He said quietly, in Russian, “look at the floor.” He then looked to the doctor, curtly saying in English, “we’ll make sure she eats. Is there anything else?”

“As long as she continues to make improvements, I won’t need to see her for four more weeks. Her shoulder will continue to make improvements, but keep it in the sling as much as possible. If there’s an issue with breathing amain, come back right away. Once you’ve had pneumonia, it’s easy to get it

a second time, especially when your lung has collapsed once. Take any issues with your breathing very seriously and come back here as soon as you notice something is off,” Dr. Williams said as he stood to leave the room.

Once he closed the door behind him, Adrik looked at me, immediately smiling when he looked at my eyes. “I knew it,” he said, his expression a mix of Just and amusement at my dark eyes.

“Like I want to not be able to eat for days at a time. I’ll take it from you guys because I love your all, but he can f**k right off with his lecture on my need to eat. I f**king know, doctor,” I said, pronouncing the “doctor” as sarcastically as possible.

Adrik looked at me for a few moments, his smile still prominent on his face. Then he looked at Andrei. “You really are a genius. She’s feeling much

better.”

I motioned for Ivan to help me up. “I am feeling better and I want to be gone from this place,” I announced. “Who’s carrying me out of here so we can

leave faster?”

1 felt Adrik’s arms around me as he picked me up. He looked in my eyes, telling me, “keep your eyes closed until we get to the vehicles. We don’t need any delays.”

“Happily,” I said, as I buried my head in his shoulder and neck until I felt him slide me onto the backseat of the SUV. I opened my eyes as he got in beside me. He was still clearly amused at my attitude with the doctor. He leaned over and kissed me passionately, but stopped much too soon for my liking. I groaned quietly, in frustration.

“I don’t want to risk you not being able to catch your breath again,” he said quietly.

“I know. I still don’t like it, but I know,”

“Soon, love. Soon. Maybe not soon enough, but soon,” he said.

Adrik’s phone rang on the way back to the penthouse. He pulled it out of his pocket. “Trino,” he said, answering it. Because we were in the SUV, he didn’t put it on speaker, so I could only hear one side of the conversation.

I felt Adrik tense beside me, so I knew whatever Trino had to tell him likely wasn’t good news. “When did it happen?” he asked. He worked until his hand was under the sweatshirt and thermal shirt I was wearing and his fingers were running lightly over my bare skin, trying to keep himself calm. “And your guys have no idea where he was headed? Have you checked the private airport?” He paused to hear Trino’s answer, then added, “okay, we’ll do it. Most of the people at that airport are my guys anyway. If that’s how he left, they’ll know something.”

Adrik was silent for a few moments, listening to Trino. I could hear that Trino was angry, but I couldn’t understand what he was saying. “No, don’t worry, Trino. We actually expected this. Sephie called it when you delivered Anthony and Lorenzo. She’ll be happy to hear she’s won the bet pool,” he said. Sal’s finally decided to run. I could hear Trino talking again, then Adrik said, “We’ll go check out the airport. Come to the building this evening

There’s even more to this.”

The conversation ended soon after. As Adrik was putting his phone back in his pocket, Ivan said from the front seat, “so Sal decided it was best to

run?”

“Trino said he must’ve had tunnels under his house, because his guys haven’t seen anyone leave in two days. It felt off, Trino sent a team in to the house. There’s been no movement or any signs of anything in the house for a couple days. They were all gone. They’re currently looking for how they got out of the house. Since we don’t know when they left, he could be anywhere by now, but my guess is he took a plane out of here,” Adrik said.

“Do we know where Ricardo is right now?” I asked

“Since we got Armando, he hasn’t been seen in the city. We didn’t have anyone on him, because we didn’t know to have anyone on him, so the short answer is no. We don’t know where he is,” Viktor said.

“I would bet all my earnings from Sal’s bet pool that he’s going wherever Ricardo is,” I said.

Adrik laughed. “Don’t say that in front of Trino. I did not peg him as having a thing for women who like to gamble.”

“He is a complicated man,” I said.

The guys dropped me, Adrik, and Misha off at the building while they went to the private airport to see what they could find out. Once upstairs, Misha and I both looked at each other. “Do you think we can find him?” he asked.

“It’s worth a try,” I said.

Adrik clicked his tongue. “How much does it zap her when she does that?” he asked Misha.

Misha looked at me, pondering his answer. “It really zapped her the first time, but since then, I don’t think it’s been a problem, but it’s hard to tell because she’s been so sick otherwise.”

They both looked to me. “Don’t look at me. I don’t even know what day it is, much less what makes me tired. Existing makes me tired lately. I mean, it’s a lot of work to be this f**king awesome, granted. But still.”

They both laughed at me. Adrik looked to Misha again. “Do you need her for it to work or can you use someone else?”

“It works best with her, but it worked with you when we were looking for her and Ivan. It might work with someone else the same way, too. It’s just clearest with her,” Misha said.

“Let’s wait until they get back from the airport. You can try it with me again or Andrei. If we don’t make it clear enough, then use Sephie. I’d like to not zap her very small supply of energy right now,” Adrik said.

“I can help with that too,” Misha said, getting a bowl from the cabinet so he could make me another bowl of broth.

“Do we have any eggs?” I asked. They both turned to look at me, clearly shocked. “I’m as shocked as you, trust me,” I said, laughing at their response to my question.

“How many do you want?” Adrik asked.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves here. One is plenty for now.”

“Instead of broth or in addition to broth?” Misha asked, pausing the heating process.

“In addition to,” I said.

Misha looked at Adrik. “I feel like the other four should be here to witness this. Should we call them? Video it? What do we do here? We can’t make her wait until they get back. The hunger might pass. This is so stressful,” he said, his hand running through his hair. I couldn’t do anything but sit and laugh at him.

“Misha, you’re my favorite. Don’t tell the others.”

“Oh, I’m telling them. That’s the first thing I’ma tell them when they get back,” he said, grinning at me.

Chapter Three Hundred Nineteen

Sephle

Misha and Adrik were in the process of making me yet more broth and another egg when the other four guys walked back into the penthouse. The shock was evident on their faces, even more so once Misha informed them it was the second time in an hour that I'd eaten.

"Misha wanted to call you guys when I asked for solid food earlier," I said, still laughing at him.

"Would've been worth it," Viktor said. "We've all been worried about you, sestrichka."

"I know. Don't blame me. It's my stomach. She has a mind of her own. She's wild. Untamed."

"What did you find at the airport?" Adrik asked, sliding a plate with one more egg on it in front of me.

"Sal left a day and a half ago. It was the middle of the night when he left, so either Trino was right and he had tunnels, or his guys fell asleep and missed him leaving." Viktor said.

"Do we know where he went?" Misha asked.

"They didn't log a flight path until they were already in the air," Ivan said.

Adrik looked at Andrei. "We're trying to save the small amount of energy that Sephie has right now. We want to see if you or I can help Misha find Sal, without him having to use her."

"Does helping Misha zap your energy, spider monkey?" Andrei asked.

"Honestly, I don't know. It's hard to tell what's what right now. I didn't think so, but the night we found Tori and Max was right before I started sleeping for days at a time again, so I don't know. Could be my lung, could be helping Misha," I said.

Andrei looked at me for a minute, like he was completely lost in thought. "It was your lung, but I can see if it works with me. It's good to have options," he said, smiling his handsome smile at me. "What do I have to do?" he asked Misha.

"Just concentrate on Sal," I said. "Misha does the rest."

"Like think of his face?" Andrei asked. I nodded my head.

"If it works the same for you as it does for me, you'll be able to see what Misha sees like it's in front of you," I said.

Andrei nodded his head, then extended his hand to Misha. It took a few minutes, but we could see Misha squeeze Andrei's hand tighter, which always meant he was seeing something. Andrei's eyes went wide, but he wasn't looking at anything we could see. We knew they'd found him. We were just waiting to see where they found him.

They watched the movie that only they could see for several minutes before it stopped. "That was weird," Andrei said once they joined us back in our reality.

"Was it like a movie?" I asked.

"It was just like when you help me, gazelle," Misha said.

"That's because Bubba is like me," I said, grinning at Andrei.

"Like you how? Like his rapidly improving observation skills?" Viktor asked.

"Those, yes. But he'll be able to know things before they happen like me soon too. That's why Adrik asked him about me staying behind when you guys went to meet the journalist with Chen," I said.

"That's how he knew you felt like shit still," Stephen said. "I was wondering if that was a lucky guess or not."

"It just popped in my head and I said it before I really thought about it, but she said that's how she reads our minds all the time, Andrei said.

Stephen laughed loudly, which was somewhat out of character for him. We all looked to him, somewhat puzzled. "I'm just glad I already told you guys I was gay because I would've never slept another minute knowing that both Andrei and Sephie can do this. I would've had to find another job. 1 would've been a wreck."

"I love that the vampire among us is worried about mind reading. Isn't that how you get your victims to willingly comply?" I asked, laughing.

"Oh, I'm totally fine with it when I'm the one doing the reading. I prefer not to be read. 900 years, Seph. There's plenty I'm not proud of in here," he said, tapping his temple.

*900 years of making you awesomely hilarious and smart as f**k. I fail to see the issue here," I said. It was hard to catch Stephen off guard, but I managed to do it. His mouth fell open. He didn't know how to respond. He just walked to me, putting his arm around my shoulders, and kissing my

cheek.

"You're just the best, Seph," he said, quietly.

"So, where is Sal?" Adrik asked Misha..

"He's in Italy. I can't be completely sure, but it looked like he was not too far from Armando's place in Naples. But I haven't been to Italy very much, so everything might look the same to me, I don't know," Misha said.

"It farrows it down slightly," Viktor said.

"You guys can try again later and see if you can narrow it down further," I said, winking at Andrei who still looked surprised it had worked.

"What if Misha uses both of us?" Andrei asked. "You seem to give him the most clarity, spider monkey. Maybe you can still give him that, but it won't zap your energy if he uses me too."

"Maybe," Adrik said, firmly. "Let's see how she gets through the day. I don't want her to go right back to sleeping the entire day."

"The bigger question is how are we going to tell Trino that we know where he is?" Ivan asked. "I mean, Trino's been cool with the very little glimpses he's gotten into Sephie's weirdness, but I'm not sure I like the idea of him knowing everything."

Andrei once again got a look like he was thinking about something else and not at all paying attention to our conversation. "He already knows. It's partly why he's so enamored with Sephie."

"He does?" Ivan asked.

I laughed. "I suspected he did, too, but never thought much about it and never tried to clarify," I said.

"Santeria is common in Colombia. It wouldn't be a stretch for him to believe Sephie has special powers," Andrei said.

I couldn't help but giggle. "I want to make him think I'm a voodoo priestess now. Does anybody have a snake I can borrow? I'll give it back once he leaves."

They all laughed at me; the relief clear on their faces that I was starting to feel better. Ivan looked at Andrei, saying, "you really are a genius. She feels much better."

I smiled widely at Ivan. It made me happy to see them help Andrei be more confident in his newfound abilities. "As for your earlier question, Squish, I don't think it's much of a stretch that Sal would run to Italy. It's probably a very safe bet that Ricardo is there as well. They're likely trying to plan. What about Niko and Vito? Where are they?" I asked.

Viktor pulled his phone out of his pocket, stepping away to find that answer as well. When he stepped away, I said, "it wouldn't surprise me if they also ran. They're probably still trying to come up with a plan to make this coup happen anyway. I almost want to let them. If Lorenzo was the logistical brains behind this, whatever these morons come up with should be hilarious."

Viktor walked back to the kitchen, with a stressed look on his face. Ivan grinned at me, then asked, "Niko and Vito ran too, didn't they? Viktor just nodded his head, looking surprised. "Sephie called it when you stepped away to check on them." Viktor's wide smile stretched across his face as he walked to me, putting his arm around my shoulders, and kissing the top of my head. "It's good to have you back, sestrichka," he said.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 320

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King of the Underworld by RJ Kane Chapter 320

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Chapter Three Hundred Twenty

Sephte

That evening, once everyone in the office had gone home for the day, Trino and his guys stopped by. Gus and Oscar were with him, but Chen was absent this time. “He’s working on a contractor job. He said it was really important and he wants it to be perfect, so he couldn’t get away when we told him we were coming here tonight,” Gus said when I asked where he was, I smiled, knowing it was one of Adrik’s projects that he was working on.

“Miha, you look much better this time,” Trino said when he walked into Adhik’s office. “How are you feeling?”

“Better. It’s still too slow, but better,” I said. I’d still been coughing occasionally when I talked. The cough sounded ho rrible, even though I was feeling

better.

Trino cursed in Spanish when he heard my cough. “She got pneumonia after she got home from the hospital. The doctor said it’s common after your lung collapses,” Ivan said as he helped me onto the cabinet behind Adrik’s desk.

“Dios mio, Miha. How are you still functioning?” he asked.

I laughed. “Ask them. I haven’t been lately. I’ve done nothing but sleep for like an entire week.”

Trino looked at Adrik, who nodded his head in confirmation. “Armando has had to suffer greatly because I’ve been bored without her,” he said, his sly

smirk on his face.

“I fully support this, Jefe,” Trino said.

“What did you find at Sal’s house?” Adrik asked.

Trino took a deep breath and blew it out loudly. He was clearly frustrated. “We found a tunnel underneath his house. That’s how they got out without my guys seeing anything, which is advantageous for my guys. I was ready to ki ll them if they’d fallen asleep and missed Sal leaving.”

“We just don’t know exactly when they left. They could be anywhere by now,” Gus said.

“They’re not anywhere. They’re in Italy,” I said.

“And they left in the middle of the night a day and a half ago,” Ivan said.

“Along with Niko and Vito at some point, as well,” Viktor added.

“How do you know they’re in Italy, Miha?” Trino asked skeptically.

“It’s the most obvious choice. There’s a very high likelihood that’s where Ricardo is as well. Sal is likely running to him for direction now that Lorenzo is dead. Niko and Vito are simply running after their master as well,” I said. Trino looked at me thoughtfully, but didn’t say anything. I caught Andrei’s eye. He was trying not to smile.

“Who’s Ricardo?” Gus asked.

“We think he’s really the one that’s behind this coup. He’s been working with Lorenzo for years, but he also has a relationship with the other bosses as well. He’s the one that’s been pulling Armando’s strings behind the scenes. Likely since he was still an underboss. He’s been using a fake name this entire time. It was likely Ricardo that instructed him on what name to use to keep from raising suspicion with the other bosses, as well as my father,”

Adrik said.

Oscar laughed quietly. “Italians are so dramatic,” he said quietly.

“You are not wrong, Oscar,” I said.

“What are you thinking, Jefe? Are you going after them?” Trino asked.

Adrik thought for a few moments before answering. I knew he was torn about his answer, because of me. Were I not in the condition I was currently In, he would be much more willing to follow them to Italy and to end this all as quickly as possible. But given that travel likely wouldn’t agree with me very well right now, he was hesitant to follow them.

“They can come to me. I’m not going anywhere with Sephie in this condition,” he said, firmly.

“Do you think they’ll be back?” Oscar asked.

“I do. Ricardo is apparently obsessed with me,” Adrik said, smirking. “Armando said Ricardo has been trying to overtake me for years, from both sides

of the business.”

“Your greatness irritates those not on your level, Jefe,” Trino said. All the guys looked at me. Even Adrik turned his chair so he could see me out of the corner of his eye. Trino noticed, giving me a questioning look.

“I said almost the exact same thing earlier, Trino. Great minds think alike,” I said smiling at him. I motioned for Ivan to help me off the cabinet. I walked to Adrik, wanting to sit on his lap. Instead of staying at his desk, he stood up, pulling me to one of the couches. He helped me sit in his lap and lean back against him; my legs crossed in between his.

Adrik put his lips close to my ear, asking quietly in Russian, “are you tired, solnishko? Do you need to go back upstairs?”

“No, I’m okay. I was cold,” I said, pulling his arm around me tighter. I could feel the low vibration of his quiet laugh as he brushed my cheek lightly with his facial hair.

“How is the situation with the Mexicans, Trino?” Ivan asked.

“They got word of what happened to Anthony and Lorenzo, so they’ve been quiet so far. They still remember what I did when I took over in Colombia, Trino said.

“I wouldn’t put it past Sal and Ricardo to keep in contact with them. They’re going to need help to make this happen, if that’s what they’re still trying to do,” I said, leaning my head back against Adrik’s shoulder.

Trino looked at me thoughtfully for a moment. He started to ask a question, then stopped himself, then decided to ask it anyway. “Miha, how do you always know what you know? You’ve been with Jefe for such a short time and yet you know this business better than men who’ve grown up in it. You’re a very smart woman, don’t get me wrong, but I’ve literally never met anyone who knows the things you know after such a short time.”

I felt Adrik hold me a little tighter as we all contemplated how to answer Trino. It was Stephen that spoke first. “Sephie has a very unique ability to understand human psychology. Because of it, she can predict what people will do in certain situations.”

Trino shook his head, like he wanted to believe Stephen, but he wasn’t sure he did. “It’s something else, for sure,” he said. “Is this why Armando took you? Surely he knows how unique you are.”

I scoffed. “That’s a complicated answer, Trino.”

“How so?”

I could feel my anger starting to rise at the thought of Armando thinking he ever had a chance with me, but I tried to keep it under control, while making sure my eyes stayed normal. I took as deep a breath as I could. “When the bosses would meet at the restaurant I used to work at, Armando would stay after sometimes and help me clean up. He would ask me questions about my life, but I always got the impression that he was trying to set me up with his son, who is close to my age. According to Dario, that was not the case at all. Apparently, both Armando and Sal had been eyeing me when Ghost came back. Dario thought they were going to get into a fight over me, but then I met Ghost and that option was taken off the table. I think it’s why Sal was going to sell me off to the highest bidder when they took me. He’s still pi ssed. Armando, too.”

Ivan, who was sitting across from me and Adrik, said quickly in Russian, “blink, princess.”

“Shi t,” I said, under my breath, closing my eyes for a second. I managed to cough to hopefully distract anyone who might’ve seen them. I opened them, looking to Ivan first. He nodded discreetly and winked at me.

“Sephie thinks they’d put Armando into a bit of a leadership role while I was away. I think he and Sal had started to think they could run the city,

either together or separately. The night I met Sephie was the night they recruited all the bosses to try to overthrow me. We’re still trying to find out how much of a role Ricardo has been playing this entire time. He seems to have more influence than he should for someone who isn’t a boss,” Adrik said.

“We think he might have the mayor in his pocket as well,” Ivan said.

Trino made a gesture like he was spitting. “Politicians. They’re all the same. They can all be bought for the right price.”

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane Novel

Score 9.7

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Title: King of the Underworld (I'm the queen of the king of the Underworld.)

Written by RJ Kane

Introduction

- **Karma**
- **Superpowers**
- **Magical Realism**
- **Love At First Sight**
- **Passion**
- **Soulmate**
- **Slow Burn**
- **Adult**
- **Supernatural**

King of the Underworld-Sephie and Max

In my life as a waitress, I, Sephie - an ordinary person - endured the icy glares and insults of customers while trying to earn a living. I believed that this would be my fate forever. However, one fateful day, the King of the Underworld appeared before me and rescued me from the clutches of the most powerful Mafia boss's son. With his deep blue eyes fixed on mine, he spoke softly: "Sephie... short for Persephone... Queen of the Underworld. At last, I have found you." Confused by his words, I stammered out a question, “P..pardon? What does that mean?” But he simply smiled at me and brushed my hair away from my face with gentle fingers: "You are safe now.” Sephie, named for the Queen of the Underworld, Persephone, she's quickly finding out how she's destined to fulfill her namesake's role. Adrik is the King of the Underworld, the boss of all bosses in the city he runs. She was a seemingly normal girl, with a normal job until it all changed one night when he walked through the front door and her life changed abruptly. Now, she finds herself on the wrong side of powerful men, but under the protection of the most powerful among them.

Sephie

I hear my wh*te noise app cut off on my phone and my alarm slowly getting louder. I wait for the chiming bells to stop before I roll over and hit the screen. With a deep breath, I muster the energy to get out of bed and drag myself to the shower.

Sephie

There is a steady stream of food to the back room throughout the night and the alcohol flows freely. I’ve gotten four smacks to my a*s in the first hour. All the boss’s eldest sons are there. Lucky me.

Sephie

After my short interlude outside, I returned to work and tried my best to act like nothing happened. Anthony had apparently been chastised while I was away because he kept his hands to himself...

Sephie

When I walked back into the meeting room, it was completely empty. Everyone had vanished. I can’t say I was disappointed by this development. I busied myself with gathering up the empty glasses and...

Sephie

I woke the next morning, well before my alarm went off, feeling like my throat was on fire. I stretched and immediately regretted it, as my entire body felt like I had been run over by a very large vehicle..

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Chapter Three Hundred Twenty-One

Adrik

“We’ve got enough evidence for the police to lock Ricardo up for a very long time, but if the mayor is in Ricardo’s pocket, he won’t go through with it. We’re trying to work around that, if possible. It’s a good move for the people of the city to see their politicians appearing to be tough on crime. We’ve gift-wrapped the doctor that created brawn and now Ricardo for them. We’re just not sure this mayor will do anything with either, yet,” I said.

“You got the guy that created brawn?” Trino asked, surprised. “I knew you stopped their plan. I didn’t know you got the guy that created it in the first place.” He looked at Gus, like he was angry about not being fold.

“I didn’t know either. I didn’t not tell you on purpose, Jefe,” Gus said, defensively.

I chuckled. “We kept it quiet. He’s a piece of work. We didn’t want word getting around that we knew who he is and risk him running. The police have been after him for 10 years,” I said.

“Why so long?” Trino asked.

“He’s been wanted for other reasons. He’s a doctor. He does backroom procedures for cash. He’s been doing procedures against people’s will for years, but he would use a specific anesthesia combination that wiped people’s memories, so nobody could remember what he looked like,” Ivan said.

“How did you find him, then?” Trino asked, curious.

“I remembered what he looked like. His drugs didn’t work on me,” Sephie said.

“Miha. Why did you go to him?” Trino asked.

“It was not by choice. But at least I could remember what he looked like. I gave the police a sketch of him. One of Sal’s guys who’s been feeding us information when it’s convenient for him recognized him and told us he was the one behind the brawn,” she said.

“So many coincidences that they become mathematically impossible,” Trino said. He looked at Sephie very seriously. “Miha, you were always meant to be with Jefe.”

She leaned her head back so she could somewhat see me. “I know,” she said sweetly.

We continued talking about possible outcomes for dealing with Ricardo and the remaining bosses, as well as the Mexicans. We ordered food while we kept talking. Misha and Andrei ran upstairs to make Sephie’s broth and get her antibiotic. She managed to eat a few bites of my food, but that’s all she wanted. During a lull in the conversation, Misha said in Russian, “I’m surprised you’re still awake, gazelle. Are you doing okay? Me and Andrei can go upstairs with you if you need to rest.”

“I’m okay, my adorable Russian guardian. At least for a little while longer,” Sephie said, smiling at him.

“How’s Martin?” Sephie asked Trino. “Why didn’t he come with you?” It was a seemingly innocent question, but I knew that Sephie rarely asked questions for no reason. I glanced at Misha, who got his usual faraway look that meant he was looking for Martin.

“Martin ha tes to travel, especially to the states. Especially in winter,” Trino said. He seemed slightly tense when he answered her, where he’d been completely relaxed before.

I noticed Andrei glance at Sephie. She said quietly, in Russian, “he’s lying.” Andrei nodded in agreement. Misha cleared his throat, signaling that he’d seen something but it was over. I glanced around the room, noticing the looks happening between Trino’s guys.

“Do you want me to pretend you’re telling the truth and let it drop or do you want to tell me what happened?” Sephie asked, inatter-of-factly.

Trino began cursing in Spanish. His guys were both amused and unsettled by Sephie’s question. One of Trino’s guys made the sign of the cross. He also 100% thinks Sephie is a witch. While he was cursing, Sephie asked Andrei, who was next to us on the couch, in Russian, “they’re disagreeing on how to handle the Mexicans, no?” He nodded his head in agreement.

Misha said in Russian, “he’s not if Colombia. I couldn’t see very clearly. I need Sephie or Andrei to see it clearer, but he’s not in Colombia.”

Sephie nodded her head, but didn’t say anything further. She was waiting to see what Trino wanted to do. When he didn’t answer, she instead asked another question. “Was Martin with you when you took over or did he come after?”

“After. I took over by myself, basically,” Trino said.

She was quiet for a moment, like she was thinking of the right words to say. “You need to be careful, Trino. Martin has been loyal to you up until now, but this disagreement has caused a bigger divide between you than you realize. He thinks his solution is better, but he doesn’t understand the violence needed when dealing with certain people. It’s going to get him kiffed.”

I glanced at Trino’s guys again. More of them were now making the sign of the cross. Yep, they’re going to be scared of her from now on. Good. Trino looked shocked. “How…” he said, completely in shock.

“You would only be uncomfortable talking about him if you two had a disagreement. The only thing you could disagree on that is big enough to cause this much discomfort is the Mexicans,” she said, shrugging her shoulders.

“Told you,” Stephen said to Trino, winking at Sephie.

“Nice save, princess,” Ivan said in Russian.

“You’re right. Again. He thinks we can negotiate with the Mexicans. He doesn’t understand how they do business. They are not to be trusted. Ever. They understand violence, though. They’ve been quiet since I took over until Anthony and Lorenzo went to them,” Trino said. We could hear the anger

in his voice.

“The Mexicans think they have a real shot at overthrowing you. Not sure what Lorenzo told them, but given that they’ve already made one attempt your life, they’ve been emboldened by whatever it was. They’re not going to give that up easily, which is why I think it will be easy for Sal to continue to stay in contact with them,” Sephie said.

Viktor cursed under his breath, then said in Russian, “I think there’s a connection between Ricardo and the Mexicans that I glossed over before. I need to go back and check, but I’m remembering seeing something.”

I nodded, saying, still in Russian, “we’ll look into it tomorrow. I don’t want to drag this out any longer tonight, for Sephie’s sake.” I could feel her getting tired, but she was still fighting it. Her ribs were starting to ache a little more than usual, which was a sign she’d been upright for too long.

“Remind me to always stay on your good side, Miha. I want to always be on your side,” Trino said, laughing somewhat nervously.

After Trino and his guys left, the guys went to their apartments, leaving Sephie and I to go to the penthouse alone. Once we were in the bedroom, 1 started to help her undress. She still struggled to get her jeans on and off easily with one hand. “Trino’s guys totally think you’re a witch now,” I said, laughing, I unbuttoned my shirt so I could put it on her for the night.

She laughed. “I might’ve enjoyed that a little too much. They were all so nervous. It’s too bad they don’t normally talk around me. I could’ve really creeped them out. Maybe I’ll scare Gus and Oscar next time,” she said, a devilish grin on her face.

“I am curious where Martin is if he’s not in Colombia. We’ll have to see what else Misha can see tomorrow,” I said, helping her into bed.

“I don’t think it’s going to be good news if he sees more,” she said quietly as she laid down on her good side.

“We’ll worry about it tomorrow. You need sleep, solnishko. You’ve been awake almost the entire day,” I said, wrapping my arms around her and pulling her as tight against me as I could.

“It was a big day,” she said, yawning. I could feel her relax as she pressed her body closer to mine. Her breathing slowed and I heard her make her cooing noises as she drifted off to sleep almost immediately.

I woke the next morning to find she was facing me, still sound asleep. That’s progress if she can lie on her bad shoulder. I took a moment to watch her sleep. I’d missed being able to see her face when I first woke in the mornings. I brushed her curls from her face and felt her start to stir. I kissed her forehead, not really caring if she woke up yet. I’d happily lie here and watch her sleep.

Twenty-one

It took her a few more minutes to finally wake up. Wi sweetly. Since she wasn’t ving on her good arm, sh touch. “I’ve missed this,” she said.

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to catch her breath. I cursed as I stopped

I felt her hand on my stomach and heard her say, “sorry,” quietly as the worked to catch her breath

“You shouldn’t be. It’s not your fault you’re in this condition. You can bet Armand

later, though.” I sad. I could feel my arose coming

to the surface thinking about taking my frustrations out on Armando for doing this Sophie I glanced at ba eves closed again. “You okay, solnishko?” I asked, running my fingers lightly over her cheek.

She smiled at me, but didn’t open her eyes. She nodded her head, then said, “I can feel your anger very strongly. I don’t want to make things worse for you than they already are.”

I laughed, my anger disappearing slowly. I kissed her forehead. “You can open your eyes, love. You won’t make thing

She slowly opened her eyes. They were still dark, but in the process of turning normal again. I’d ne

tappened befoes

I could clearly see the dark brown, almost black color fade into the background as the normal three rng of color returned. “Did you s purpose?” I asked.

“Do what on purpose?”

“I could watch them change this time. I’ve never seen it as it happened. It was incredible. It was like watching into day,” I said, still mesmerized by her eyes.

“That sounds really complicated. I for sure didn’t do that on purpose,” she said, laughing,

I kissed her gently. “You’re amazing.”

Sorinating

Chapter Three Hundred Twenty-Two

Adrik

The guys were waiting on us as usual when we came out from the bedroom. She seemed like she had more energy this morning than she'd had in weeks. I didn't have to wait on her to walk slowly down the hallway. The guys noticed she was brighter this morning, too.

"You look much better this morning, gazelle," Misha said. He smiled at her, but was clearly surprised as well.

"I feel better this morning. First time I haven't been in a fog when I wake up in a while," she said. "I might actually want real food this morning, too."

Misha looked around at everyone else. "Thank God you're all here to witness it this time. I can't handle the pressure of how to document these milestones in her life," he said.

For the first time since she'd been hurt, she laughed without grabbing her ribs. I could feel the dull ache that was constantly present there, but no sharp pains this time. It was a nice change.

"Let's make a deal," she said, turning to me. I raised my eyebrow at her, wondering what she had in mind. "If I can eat real food for breakfast, then we can try Andrei's idea of Misha using both of us to find Sal, as well as Martin. I want to know what those two are doing," she said.

"Deal," I said. I also wanted to know what those two were doing. If Martin was trying to make a deal with the Mexicans behind Trino's back, that could put Trino în even more danger. The smile that she gave me when I agreed made my heart stop.

"How did you know that Trino and Martin were disagreeing on what to do with the Mexicans, princess?" Ivan asked.

"It just popped in my head. That's how it works for me. Trino was thinking about it, probably trying to decide if he should bring it up or not. Given his reaction, I think he'd decided to not bring it up," she said.

"His guys think she's a witch now, too," I said, laughing.

Andrei laughed. "I noticed several of them made the sign of the cross. At least we don't have to worry about them around her now. They won't want to be around her."

"Did you have the same thing pop in your head, Andrei?" Stephen asked. "I know you knew Trino was lying when he made excuses for Martin not being here."

Andrei nodded his head. "I didn't get as many details as Sephie, though. I knew they'd had an argument, but that was all I could tell. She filled in way more details and Misha confirmed when he said Martin wasn't in Colombia."

"It does make me nervous if he's not in Colombia. I wanted to ask Trino if he knew where Martin was, but he clearly didn't want to talk about it," I said.

"We can find out more after breakfast," Sephie said, grinning at me. Andrei got up to make her the usual bowl of broth, since that seemed to be helping the most right now.

Viktor had been busy on his computer since we walked into the kitchen, likely trying to find the connection between Ricardo and the Mexicans he'd mentioned the night before. His phone beeped, indicating food was waiting for us. He started to get up, but Stephen put his hand on his shoulder. "I'll get it. You keep working. I'd like some real answers today," he said as he got up to get food.

After Sephie managed to eat half her breakfast, plus the entire bowl of broth, she got up on her own from the kitchen island. She motioned for Andrei and Misha to come with her. She glanced over her shoulder, asking the rest of us, "Sal first or Martin first?"

We looked at each other, then answered, "Martin first."

She giggled. "Good. That's what I wanted, too." She'd stopped in the open area between the kitchen and the living room, grabbing Misha's hand with her one free hand. "Somehow I think this will work even better once I have two hands again, but we'll see how it goes this time," she said. Andrei extended his hand to Misha as well. Misha got his usual faraway look in his eyes as he searched for Martin. After just a minute, Andret and Sephie

were clearly watching something that the rest of us couldn't see.

"Got him," Misha said quietly. They watched for a few moments, then Misha's broad smile stretched across his face. "You got sound, gazelle," he said as she laughed quietly. They continued watching, the looks on their faces turning very serious. After a few minutes, the movie was apparently over.

Misha was smiling ear-to-ear as he said, "that was the clearest one yet, gazelle. I've never had sound before."

She looked at Andrei. "It was Bubba. He's the power boost we needed." Andrei was trying not to be too surprised at what had happened, but he was still coming to terms with it.

Misha looked to us, saying. "Martin is with the Mexicans. We could hear them, but since none of us speak Spanish, I have no clue what they were saying. It looked like they were negotiating, though. Then somebody hit the fast forward button." He paused, running his hand through his hair. "This is not going to end well for Martin."

"They're going to use him as revenge for killing Anthony and Lorenzo. He'll be displayed in a very public way so Trino can't mistake the message." Andrei said.

Sephie was quietly chewing on her bottom lip, contemplating what they'd just seen. She looked to me. "I think we can stop it, but it would have to come from Trino, which means he's going to know what we can do." She glanced at Ivan after looking at me.

"I don't like the idea of him knowing, but if they kill Martin like you say, it's going to start another war. Guaranteed," Ivan said.

I pulled my phone from my pocket, dialing Trino's number. He picked up on the first ring. "Jefe, you're calling early," he said. We could hear the surprise in his voice.

"Trino, you need to come to the penthouse. Your guys can wait downstairs. It's important," I said.

"I'll be there in 10 minutes," Trino said and hung up.

Viktor, who had still been searching on his computer this whole time, finally found what he was looking for. "Found the link between Ricardo and the Mexicans. It's a deal from years ago, when Vitaliy was still in charge. Major development deal in Mexico. He also has a multi-million-dollar house there. Ricardo is the link between the Mexicans and Lorenzo."

Sephie turned to look at Misha and Andrei. She grabbed Misha's hand again, saying, "let's find Sal before Trino gets here. I should be able to know what they're saying this time, if he's with Ricardo like I think he's going to be."

They went through the process again to find Sal this time. It went faster this time, but they watched for longer. Misha and Andrei both looked to Sephie when the movie only they could see stopped. She was chewing on her bottom lip again. She looked up at them, then to me. "He's using the Mexicans as his army. Since we took out half the bosses already, he needs manpower. This wasn't about going around Trino, on the bosses' end. That came from the Mexicans. Ricardo needs manpower. He promised to support them in taking out Trino if they helped him take you out," she said. "Sal is angry about Lorenzo and wants vengeance. Never mentioned Anthony, though. That was weird."

"Sal is with Ricardo now?" Ivan asked.

Misha nodded his head. "They're definitely in Italy, but I'm not sure exactly where," he said.

Andrei walked to Viktor. "Something looked familiar. I've seen it in pictures before, but I don't know what it's called," he said. Viktor pushed his computer toward Andrei so he could try and find their location. It only took a few minutes and he had found where they were. "They're in Amalfi." He looked to Misha. "You were close yesterday. It's really close to Naples."

Viktor's phone rang, indicating that Trino was downstairs. "Be right back," he said as he walked out. Sephie walked to me, tucking herself into my side. I could feel her nerves beginning to get bad. I pulled her to me, saying quietly, "I love you. More than anything, but a little more each day." She sighed and rested her head against my chest. "How much did that zap you?" I asked.

"I feel it, but it wasn't like the first time. Andrei definitely helped take most of it. It didn't zap him at all the first time he did it. He must have superpowers," she said, laughing.

"Andrei still holds back, gazelle. That's why it's not quite as clear with him. You don't hold back," Misha said. "I figured out the difference this time."

Ivan tghed. "Sephir doesn't know what that means."

Chapter Three Hundred Twenty-Three

Adrik

“Squish is right. I did not know holding back was an option,” she said.

Viktor walked in with Trino, who looked quite nervous. “Jefe, what’s going on?” he asked.

Before I could answer, Sephie said, “Trino, Martin is going to be killed. I can explain how I know, but I think you already have an idea of how I know. I’ve seen it. It’s going to be very violent and it’s going to be a very public declaration of war.”

Trino cursed in Spanish. “I told him that negotiations were pointless.”

“He’s there now, Trino. Have you talked to him since you’ve been in the city?” I asked.

“No, Jefe. I told him when I left to stay in Colombia since he wouldn’t come with me.”

“He didn’t listen. He’s in Mexico. You’re the only one that would be able to convince him to get out of there before they kill him. He still has a chance to escape, but not for long. He has to leave now,” Sephie said. She had an urgent edge to her voice that Trino heard. He looked at her thoughtfully for a moment, then pulled his phone from his pocket. We listened to his conversation with Martin, but no one could understand it. It got heated, then ended with Trino clearly pleading with Martin. He took a moment to collect himself once the call ended, then looked to Sephie.

“Miha, you have the gift. My grandmother did too. I thought you might because you know too much,” he said, smiling at her. “You were right. He’s in Mexico. I told him what would happen if he stayed. I don’t know if he’s going to listen to me. He’s very stubborn.”

I glanced at Misha who was checking on the potential outcomes. He ran his hand up and down his arm to rub out the goosebumps. Sephie noticed, too. “He’ll listen,” she said. Trino sighed, clearly stressed about the entire situation.

“Even if he gets out, they’re still likely to declare war,” Ivan said. “Ricardo is using them as an army to try and overthrow Boss. You’re their reward for helping Ricardo.”

I recognized one or two of the curse words that came out of Trino’s mouth, since Sephie had clued me in on what they meant. She tried not to laugh, but she was always so amused at Trino’s tirades.

“Don’t worry. If it comes to that, we’ll help you stop it. We’re looking for ways to prevent it, though,” I said. Trino simply nodded his head.

He looked at Sephie, a sly smile evident on one side of his mouth. “My guys are all scared of you now, Miha. They’re going to struggle to be in the same room as you after they hear about this.”

While I hadn’t thought much about it the night before, I suddenly had a strong feeling of unease when it came to Trino’s guys being around Sephie.

Sephie shrugged her shoulders. “You can tell them I don’t pry, but they’re not going to listen. But make sure they understand what will happen to them if they think burning the witch is a thing that should be brought back. Feel free to embellish as much as you want on that one,” she said very seriously. I tensed at the thought, my anger unexpectantly rising to the surface. I knew she felt it as she took a step toward Trino. “Your guys or not, I will end them if they ever so much as think about coming after me because of this.”

1 knew by the look on Trino’s face that her eyes were dark. He was completely shocked, as well as afraid. She was using it to her advantage. Just for emphasis, all the guys stood up and surrounded her as she stepped back to me, I felt Ivan’s protective bubble around us as he told Trino that it was best to stay with us, rather than against us. I felt Sephie’s hand on top of mine as I slid it around her waist, pulling her back against me.

Trino’s eyes were wide. He put his hands up, like he was worried something would happen. “No worries. That will never be a problem. I’ll take care of it myself if one of them even thinks of doing anything to harm you,” he said.

Sephie reached up and touched Ivan’s back, who was standing in front of her. I felt the bubble disappear as he turned to look at her. His face softened immediately when he looked at her so I knew she was smiling at him. He stepped out of the way so she could see Trino once more.

“I give you my word, it will not be a problem, Miha,” Trino said. Sephie simply nodded her head.

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The words, I felt Adrik’s anger feeding into mine. I knew my eyes were going dark, if they weren’t

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much as you want on that one,” I said As already, but I didn’t care. wanded Tring to If they ever so much as Think about

When Trinn saw my eyes, he had energeti taken a step back. His feet never moved, but he shrunk back from me. I took a step toward him, just to drive my point home, as I spoke The didn’t say a word, they just moved urround me and Adnk. Tring was roughly my height, so they all towered over him. They food advantage of this and Cranked up the intimidation actor as high as it would go. I could feel Adrik’s anger feeding into mine, even though he was behind me. 11

was giving Trino. He would’ve been ready to rip Trine apart if I said the word at that moment. Any of them would have

Ivan stepped in front of me, putting his body in between me and Trin. I felt his protective bubble go up around me, which also fed into my anger. I could hear Ivan tell Trino, “It’s best if you’re with us, rather than against us.” could vaguely hear Trine’s response, but it was difficult to understand his words with Ivan’s bubble of protection around me, I stepped back against Adrik, his hand on my waist. I put my hand on top of his, hoping to calm us both down slig

I noticed that when I moved, the guys moved as well. They didn’t need to see the, but they knew exactly where I was. When I took a step back against Adrik, Ivan closed the distance between us, staying directly in front of me. I smiled, knowing he took his job very seriously. His anger was also feeding mine reached out and put my hand on his back, trying him as well, He turned to look at me and I felt his bubble slowly disappear. He saw

me etniling at him and his face immodiately softened.

“Message received,” I said quietly to all of them in Russian. They all relaxed, but didn’t move.

“I give you my word, it will not be a problem, Milia,” Trino said, I simply nodded. Whatever had given me the idea in the first place was in the background now. I want to know if Misha or Andrei got anything from that.

Trine stayed in the penthouse for a few minutes longer, but eventually took his leave. He promised to keep us updated on whether Martin took his

advice and left Mexico or not.

Once he was gone, I looked to Adrik, smiling. He raised his eyebrow, then kissed me gently. “It was different again,” he said. He looked to Ivan, asking, “can you feel her anger yet?”

“I did that time. It was unreal. I’ve only been that angry a handful of times and it’s always resulted in someone else dying,” he said.

I laughed. “I could feel both of you. You were both feeding into my anger, which is why I think it was so strong. But I can tell the difference.”

“How so?” Ivan asked.

I thought for a moment, trying to figure out how to explain what I felt. “It’s like two different functions, I think.” I paus suddenly hit me. I looked at Ivan, “you’re the shield.” Then I looked at Adrik, “and you’re the sword.”

Adrik smiled at me. “I think I understand, but explain.”

trying to find the words. It

“Your anger is beside me, looking for direction, if you will. Like all I would’ve had to do is point at Trino and you would’ve ripped him apart. But your anger is a part of me, moving through me. An extension. Just like mine is a part of you. Ivan’s is different. It’s broader and it’s focused outward. Away from me. His fire burns just as hot, but it’s directed away from me, where yours is not. His anger feels like a barrier in front of me. Your anger is always with me. A part of me,” I said,

“I raught a glimpse of your eyes, princess. They’re still getting darker when it happens. I’m surprised Trino didn’t piss himself,” Ivan said.

“I saw them change this morning,” Adrik said. “She was looking at me as they changed back to normal. I’ve never seen anything so amazing.” He turned me so he could look in my eyes. He was still completely mesmerized. I reached up and kissed him gently.

le

“‘‘ i

“Did you get anything when Tring told me his guys were scared of me now asked Andrei and Misha

“I got a quick hit of nausea, gazelle I don’t know about which one, or ones, but it wasn’t good. I’m glad you said something, because I was going to it you didn’t. It’s definitely not Tino, but one of his guys is going to have a problem with this,” Misha said.

“Same as last night for me, spider monkey. You get more details than I do, but) knew the potential for there to be a problem is there,” Andrei said

“I think you scared Trino enough that he’ll either keep this to himself or he’ll keep his guys away from you from now on,” Stephen said. “I’ve never seen him so shocked as when you threatened him. That’s going to haunt him for a while.”

“Good. That was the point,” I said, grinning. “Who’s hungry?”

They all laughed. “It’s good to have you back, sestrichka,” Viktor said, shaking his head.

Chapter Three Hundred Twenty-Four

Sephle

Adrik, Ivan, Viktor, and Stephen paid another visit to Armando that evening. I'd needed a short nap after the morning's festivities, but I was managing to stay awake for much longer. And my appetite was coming back slowly. I could snack periodically throughout the day without too much trouble, which was giving me more energy finally.

Misha and Andrei were both happy to stay with me in the penthouse while the others went downstairs to torture Armando.

“How do I get more details, spider monkey?” Andrei ‘asked while they were heating up yet more broth for me.

I thought for a minute. “I'm honestly not sure how to answer that, Bubba. I haven't always had all the details I get now come so easily. The more I practice, the more details I get. I think time is the answer. The more you use it, the clearer everything will be. Same as Misha. The more he uses his gift, the clearer it gets. I think there will come a time when he won't need anyone else as a battery, too. I think he'll be able to do it on his own just as well as he can with us,” I said.

“Really? You think so?” Misha asked. He was clearly surprised at the thought of not needing anyone to see his visions.

“I do. It doesn't make sense that you would always need me or Andrei to make it work. You didn't need me in the beginning. I just made it different. Once you master it, you should be able to do it on your own. Which I think you're getting closer to, if you could tell the difference between me and Bubba this morning.” I said.

“Yeah, that reminds me, how did you know the difference?” Andrei asked. “And how did you know I was holding back? I didn't even know I was holding back.”

“With Sephie, it feels like she's showing me how to do it, even though she has no idea how it works. There's still this calm direction from her when she helps me, but I can tell that she's jumped in with both feet. With you, Andrei, you really have no idea what's going on still, you're just along for the ride. But you're hoping you don't die in the process,” Misha said, laughing.

“That sounds accurate,” Andrei said. He was laughing as well, not really knowing what else to say.

“This is all a little weird, if we're being honest. It's a lot to take in,” I said.

“Was it hard for you, spider monkey? You didn't have anybody when you discovered you could do this, did you?” Andrei asked.

“It wasn't hard. I did think there was something wrong with me, not gonna lie. But I've shown it more to you guys than I ever did to anyone else. Even my mom. Little bits here and there with her before she died, but I mostly kept to myself. It was only just starting when she was still alive. It's gotten much stronger as I get older. Then I met you guys and I feel like I skipped ahead like ten levels. I've been more open with it this year than I ever have before. You can ask Adrik, too, I was petrified he would think I was crazy at first,” I said.

Misha laughed. “We saw it. When you would tell him things about the bosses, you were timid about it. But you were always right.”

“Apparently, it was all meant to happen the way it did. You guys seeing it in me helped you see it in yourselves. There's something special about Viktor and Stephen too, but they're still scared by it,” I said.

“Should we make bets on what it is with those two?” Andrei asked.

“Um, yeah. Of course we should,” I said, laughing.

“Before Andrei found out he was like you, I would've said Stephen's superpower was his sense of humor that nobody knew existed until you came along, gazelle,” Misha said.

“Right? How funny is that dude? And how the hell does he keep a straight face literally every single time?” I asked. “And Viktor is still the father figure of the group. He just goes about his day silently making sure we're all taken care of and have everything we need. He's kind of the best, really.”

We were being silly in the kitchen while I had yet another snack when Adrik and the rest of the guys got back from downstairs. Adrik immediately

walked to me, leaning down to kiss me. “I'm happy you're still awake, solnishko,” he said, his handsome smile stretching across his face.

“How was Armando? Have you offered to let him jump off the roof again? Is he ready to take you up on the offer this time?” I asked. I grabbed Adrik's hand with my one free hand, inspecting his knuckles. He laughed softly and kissed my temple. “I'm so relieved you're finally feeling better,” he said.

“He's definitely regretting not listening to you, Seph. I think he's cried himself to sleep more often than not lately,” Stephen said. While his expression didn't give away much, there was a definite air of satisfaction present.

“Why do I feel like you're the reason for his tears?” I asked Stephen.

He cleared his throat. “I do the reading, Seph. Not the other way around,” he said, trying to look at me sternly. I couldn't help but laugh at him.

“You're just worried I'm going to learn your secret for your insane mastery of your facial expressions,” I said. His smile stretched across his face. “It's one of my best tricks,” he said, grinning at me. “I could not agree more,” I said.

“Did you learn anything useful or did you just take your frustrations out on him tonight?” Misha asked.

“He confirmed the link between Ricardo and the Mexicans. He also said it was Lorenzo's idea to go to them,” Viktor said.

“He was planning on using them instead of any of the bosses' men. He knew there would be mass casualties so he was going to sacrifice the Mexicans first. He promised to help them overthrow Trino, but even Armando doubted that would've actually happened. Lorenzo knew there likely wouldn't have been enough of them left,” Adrik said.

“Not surprising. However, it means the Mexicans are not going to stop coming for Trino until Sal and Ricardo are stopped and maybe not even then. We might not be able to wait on Henry to figure his life the f**k out,” I said, finishing up my latest snack. When I looked up, they were all looking at me, completely amused. “What?” I asked.

“Extra spicy Sephie might be my favorite version,” Misha said, laughing.

It took four more days before Trino got any more information about Martin. He finally called Adrik in the afternoon, once he'd heard the fate of Martin. Misha, Andrei, and I all felt fairly certain that he would make it out, but we also never checked on him again. We were all relieved to hear for sure that he'd made it out and was safely back in Colombia.

Trino stopped by the building that evening. Gus, Oscar, and one of his normal security guys were with him, but the rest of his men chose to stay in the lobby. “Was that your choice or theirs?” Ivan asked when Trino walked into the office, mostly unaccompanied.

“It was definitely theirs,” Oscar said, trying not to laugh. “They're some of the baddest motherf**kers in Colombia, but they're scared of a girl.”

“For good reason,” Trino's security guy said quietly. It was the first time I'd ever heard him speak.

“And yet, here you are,” I said. My tone wasn't threatening. Yet. But I was serious enough that he got tense when I addressed him. “Did the rest of them put you up to coming up here or are you just so curious that you can't help yourself?” He looked at me, somewhat surprised. He wasn't sure what to say. Trino stayed quiet as well. “I saved the life of your boss's right-hand man. I've saved your life before as well, you just don't know it. A little gratitude would serve you well if you'd like to keep the baddest motherf**ker title,” I said, walking to the couch to sit beside Andrei. He held his

tosit arm out, helping me sit, then wrapped it around my shoulders so I could curl up next to him.

He leaned down and said, “extra spicy Sephie is my favorite version too.”

Gus looked at Trino, then looked at me. “I see now why he likes you so much,” he said.

Adrik cleared his throat, clearly done with where the conversation was headed. “Where is Martin now?” he asked.

“He's back in Colombia, under heavily armed guards, just in case. He said he almost didn't make it out. Instead of just leaving like I told him to, he tried to have a conversation with them. They caught on that he knew something was off and tried to keep him from leaving. He barely managed to get out, but he's safe now.” Trino looked at me, a look of sincerity on his face. “Miha, he would've been killed if not for you. I suspected he would go to Mexico, but I never actually thought he was dumb enough to do it. I thought he was smarter than that. You saved his life.”

“It was a group effort,” I said, catching Misha's eye. I felt Andrei squeeze my shoulders a little tighter. “I'd happily do it again. Just keep your weak ass

security guys that clearly can't handle the fact that I'm different away from me.

Mishan laughed, asking in Russian, “can extra spicy gazelle stay forever? She's definitely my favorite.”

Chapter Three Hundred Twenty-Five

Sephie

“The Mexicans still haven’t figured out that Lorenzo was going to sacrifice them to overthrow Boss, basically. Do you have any spies within their ranks? Can you get word to any of them that was the plan? We can cause a little division between them and Ricardo,” Ivan said.

“Si, I can get word to them. That’s how Martin made it out. Two of the guys that are loyal to me created a diversion so Martin could escape. They’re high enough in ranks that they’ll be able to get word to the right people,” Trino said.

“There needs to be a little friction between them and Ricardo. Since Ricardo is obsessed with being better than me, I’d like for him to understand that’s not possible before he dies,” Adrik said. He was sitting at his desk, across the office from where I was on the couch with Andrei. I could feel his anger, but it was at a controllable level. His patience was wearing thin and his frustration with me being hurt was beginning to become a problem.

“I learned how to be extra spicy from watching him,” I said to Andrei in Russian, so only he could hear. I was hoping he’d be able to contain his laughter. He made a valiant effort, but still inevitably laughed loud enough that everyone heard him. Adrik raised his eyebrow at me, wanting to know what had happened. I kept my mouth shut and just smiled at him, hoping it wouldn’t irritate him more.

“I’m considering going back to Colombia soon, Jefe. I don’t like being away for too long, as I’m sure you understand. There is also the matter of Massimo that still needs to be addressed,” Trino said.

“I won’t keep you here, Trino. You’re always welcome, but I would want to be in Colombia if I were you. We’ll keep an eye on Sal. I expect them to return. Keep me informed on the Mexicans. I’ll do the same for Sal and the other two bosses,” Adrik said.

They continued to talk for a few minutes before Trino left with the three guys brave enough to be in the same room as me. Once they were gone and Viktor had returned, Adrik looked at me and Andrei. “Now, do you want to tell me what you two were laughing about?” He tried to say it sternly, but 1 could tell it was an act.

I giggled. “They’ve been saying that they like the extra spicy version of me, so when you said what you said about Ricardo, I told Bubba that I learned it from watching you.”

I could feel the pull in my chest that meant he was thinking about how much he loved me. His smirk evident on his face, he just pointed to me, then pointed to his desk. Andrei helped me off the couch so I could go to him. He pushed his chair back so I could sit in his lap, his arms wrapped tightly around me. He leaned down, his lips next to my ear, whispering, “it’s getting more and more difficult to fight my desire for you, solnishko. Especially when you’re bratty. It makes me want to f**k it out of you.” As soon as he got the words out, I felt his intense desire for me. He knew I always struggled to control myself when I felt it and now we were in front of everyone so I had no choice but to contain myself.

I laughed quietly, trying to maintain control. “You’re a little bit evil,” I said quietly so only he could hear. I pushed my hips back into him discreetly, causing his breath to hitch just slightly.

“So are you,” he said, his arms holding me tightly.

“I feel like we should celebrate your last dose of antibiotic, gazelle,” Misha said, his wide, handsome smile across his face. Me and the Wonder Twins were once again in the kitchen making me snacks while the rest of the guys were downstairs with Armando.

“I am glad it kept me from having to go back to the hospital, but I am more glad that I won’t have to take it any more after this one. I’m hoping my appetite actually goes back to normal now. And that I can do more than, well, nothing,” I said.

“We’re all looking forward to that, spider monkey. The gym is more fun when you’re there,” Andrei said.

“Well, you didn’t tell me that. I could’ve been your cheerleader this whole time, but you guys have been going while I was sleeping. You only have yourselves to blame for that poor life choice,” I said, grinning at them both.

“Do you know how much trouble we’d be in if we got you to go to the gym with us and it made you sleep for a day and a half again?” Misha asked.

I laughed. “That’s fair. Is this how he was before he met me?” I asked. Adrik had been almost cranky lately. He refused to even attempt s*x with me because he was worried I wouldn’t be able to catch my breath. Really, he was worried he wouldn’t be able to hold back. Honestly, I was also worried. Not being able to catch my breath after he kissed me a few times had scared me. I didn’t want to tell him, as I didn’t want him to think he couldn’t

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chould talk to him about it, sphlet anskey,” Andrei sand I was too busy laughing with Misha to notice that Andrei had stopped paying attention bo wat vanwwqvation hosteal be was fishing around

my head.

“I now understand Stephen’s aversion to being read,” I said. Misha looked at mi, confused.

“Talk to who about what he asked.

“Talk to Bows. He’s cranky because she’s still hunt, so there’s been no, uh, extracurricular activities lately. But she got scared a few times when he kissed her and she couldic’t catch her breath after. She won’t tell him, though, Andrei said.

Misu looked at me seriously. “You should talk to him about it. It will help him be a little more patient while you heal a little more. You’re acting more like yourself lately, but we don’t know what your lung feels like. Neither does he. Just because it’s not hurting you doesn’t mean it’s completely healed. And you heard the doctor, it’s easy to get pneumonia again until your long completely heals. None of us want you to have to go back to the hospital”

“I don’t want him to feel like he can’t touch me,” I said. “Knowing him, he will,”

“He won’t,” Andrei said. “Knowing that you’re still struggling to catch your breath, and especially that it scared you, will help him keep that side of him under control, if you will. The last thing he wants to do is hurt you.”

“He’s still working through you being taken. Guys like to show that we’re in love with physical intimacy. He just wants to show you that he loves you is all. If he knows that you’re still struggling even with him kissing you, it’ll be easier for him to wait,” Misha said.

“How did you two get to be so handsome and so wise?” I said, smiling at both of them.

“Stop trying to change the subject, spider monkey. I’ll tell him if you don’t,” Andrei said, grinning at me.

“I hate you.” Just for fun, I made my eyes go dark. Now that I’d been playing with it more, I could tell when it happened more easily. It would still surprise me, like during my last check-up, but I was becoming aware of when it happened and more importantly, I could control it when it happened. I’ had to admit that I was having more fun with it than I probably should. I knew the guys weren’t intimidated by it, but Trino definitely was. I probably liked that a little too much.

“You love me and you know you do. Your demon eyes don’t scare me,” Andrei said, laughing.

“Who knew one of the side effects of antibiotics was extra spicy attitude?” Misha said.

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Chapter Three Hundred Twenty-Six

Sephie

Adrik and the other three guys walked back into the penthouse from their almost nightly visit with Armando. I could see the stress melt off of Adrik as soon as he saw I was still awake and smiling at him.

“And how is dearest Armando tonight?” I asked, standing up almost at a normal pace from the kitchen island. Adrik was by my side immediately, his arms around my waist.

“He might be learning firsthand how painful broken ribs are. I tried to explain it to him, but since I really have no point of reference, I decided to show him,” Ivan said. Misha just laughed and gave him a high five.

“Squish. What does it say about me that I adore this side of you?” I said, laughing.

“It says that you’re absolutely perfect, solnishko,” Adrik said, leaning down to kiss me gently. His s*xy smirk was evident on his face.

“Meant for this shi t, gazelle,” Misha said.

“Did he have any nuggets of information tonight?” Andrei asked.

“He might have, had we given him a chance to speak,” Stephen said. “Apparently, Trino’s guys not being okay with Sephie made us all slightly

irritable.”

I looked at Stephen, surprised. “Should I not have told Trino about Martin?” Adrik pulled me back against him, his arms around my waist. He gently pressed his cheek against my neck.

“No, I think you did the right thing. Seph. We were talking about it on the way up. We were all somewhat surprised by our anger about the situation. It’s not just you that they have an issue with. They just don’t know about Misha and Andrei’s parts in it, but you did what you did when they took you and Ivan and you took all of it so they’d be protected. It’s not fair,” Stephen said. I could see he was frustrated with the situation.

“I didn’t want them to know about Misha and Andrei. That’s too much of a risk,” I said,

“We know. And we agree. But it still doesn’t make the situation any more right,” Ivan said.

“The good news is that we don’t have to see them very much once they go home,” I said. “But I won’t deny how adorable I think you all are for being pi ssed off about this right now.”

“We haven’t gotten you healed from the last time something happened before another threat showed up. It’s enough to make anybody angry,” Viktor

said.

I stood, leaning against Adrik, looking at all the guys. Viktor, Ivan, and Stephen were clearly frustrated with Trino’s guys. Misha and Andrei were a mix of frustrated with a splash of worry. I could feel Adrik’s anger at the thought of Trino’s guys even entertaining the thought of harming me. But more than that, more than the feelings of anger I was getting from all of them, I felt their love. They were fully prepared to destroy Trino’s entire security team, ally or not, if it came to that. To make sure I was safe.

“Seph, why the tears?” Stephen asked, concerned. I was still smiling at them, but I was overcome with emotion, which usually meant tears would flow freely.

“They’re happy tears, I promise. I know I’ve told you how safe you all make me feel, but I can feel it so clearly right now from every single one of you. You’re all ready to annihilate Trino’s entire security force if it comes to it. I know a couple of you want to do it just to make a point, even if they don’t try anything.” I said, laughing. I caught Stephen and Ivan both nodding their heads like they agreed with that line of thinking: “I can feel how angry you all are, but more than that, I can feel how much you love me.”

“We can’t imagine life without you in it, princess,” Ivan said, winking at me.

“My God, it would be so boring,” Misha said as dramatically as possible, to help lighten the mood. I couldn’t help but laugh as I wiped the tears away.

Adrik turned me to face him, helping me to dry the tears. He looked at me, very seriously, saying, “you’ve given us something we never thought possible. You’ve shown us all how much better we should be. And most importantly, you’ve brought your own magic into our lives. Our world was very dark before you, solnishko. You’ve reminded us that the darkest shadows come from the brightest light. And 1, for one, will do everything in my power to make sure you’re always able to shine as brightly as possible. I feel fairly confident in saying every single one of them will too.”

Adrik

Once Sephie and I were alone in the bedroom, she still looked thoughtful as I helped her get out of her clothes and into my thirt for the night. “You still have something on your mind, love.” I said, putting my shirt on her. She chewed on her bottom lip. I could feel her nervousness, which was unusual for her. “What is it?” I asked, putting my fingers under her chin gently and lifting her face so she would look at me.

“I know how frustrated and cranky you are because we can’t have s*x,” she said.

I laughed. “I am, yes, but I can handle it until you’re better.”

She took as deep a breath as she was able to. “It’s not just that. I’m just as frustrated and that’s probably why Misha and Andrei keep telling me I’m extra spicy, but…” She paused like she wasn’t sure what to say. Her good hand started to fidget with anything within reach.

“But what, love?”

“It…it scared me when I couldn’t catch my breath after we kissed,” she said. She looked at me like she was unsure if I was going to be upset with her for telling me.

“Sephie…” I said, pulling her to me. I just wrapped my arms around her and held her for a few minutes. I sighed. “You’ve been acting like you felt better. I can’t feel anything from your lung, so I wrongly assumed it was better than it is. I went too fast and I’m sorry,” I said.

“I am feeling better. I just can’t breathe like I should be able to yet and you’re very good at taking my breath away,” she said. I could hear her smiling when she said it, even though she had her face buried in my chest.

1 put my hand on the back of her neck, pulling her face away from my chest so I could look in her eyes. “I’m happy you told me, solnishko. I don’t want to hurt you and I don’t want you to end up back in the hospital. I will do a better job of controlling myself until you’re ready,” I said, leaning down to kiss her gently.

“You’re not mad?” she asked. She was almost confused by my reaction, which made her even more adorable than usual.

“How could I be mad that you told me that or that you’re still healing?” I asked, trying not to laugh at her doe eyes. She chewed on her bottom lip. not sure how to answer. “I will never be mad that you come to me with something that’s bothering you, Sephie. This is how relationships work. We’re

a team.”

“You’re not going to swear off touching me until I’m better?”

“I will if that’s what you want, but that’s definitely going to make me extremely cranky. I’m going to go through the entire stockpile of punching bags we have here,” I said, playing with her curls.

“I don’t want that. I definitely don’t want that,” she said. “I just thought I would have to convince you that those extreme measures weren’t needed.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at her. “We both know how terrible I am at keeping my hands off you. I’d rather not have to try to get better at that. I think you benefit from me touching you more than you realize, too. But I can definitely make sure you don’t lose your breath again until your lung is all the way healed.” She looked up at me, still unsure. It had been quite a while since she’d needed to search my eyes, but she needed to tonight. I let her. I’d almost missed it. I’d grown to adore the sweet smile of satisfaction that she got when she didn’t find what she was always worried she would see. “You’re getting much better much faster now that you can eat a little more. And now that you’re done with your antibiotics, that process should speed up. We won’t have to wait that much longer,” I said. I felt the strong pull in my chest as she was satisfied with her search and smiled sweetly at me. I leaned down and kissed her gently once more. “Now get in bed. You need sleep so you get better faster,” I said, grinning at her.

The next morning, I woke up to find her facing me again. For the first time in weeks, she was awake before I was. She was quietly watching me sleep, waiting for me to wake up. Her fingers lightly tracing circles over my back. I could feel her warmth before I even opened my eyes.

“You’re awake,” I said, opening my eyes to see her gorgeous smile. “That’s the first time you’ve been awake before me in weeks. Have you been awake long?”

“No, just a few minutes, but it was a nice few minutes. Although I have grown to love you holding me down when you wake me up though,” she said, biting her bottom lip.

“I’ll hold you down whenever you like,” I said, my mind immediately jumping to all the possibilities of how I could take advantage of that. I leaned over and kissed her gently. She rolled onto her back, stretching her good arm over her head, all her joints popping like normal.

“I want to see how painful it is if I leave the sling off for a bit today. I think my shoulder is more sore from not moving than it is because of being dislocated now,” she said.

“That’s a good sign. If you feel like you want to start moving it, then it’s healing from being torn when it was dislocated, I just don’t know about the extra weight from your cast.”

“Yeah, remind me to have a conversation with the doctor about rationing his cast materials next time. I don’t know much about setting broken bones, but using all the cast supplies seems excessive. This thing weighs as much as I do.”

I laughed. “It might weigh more than you do since you haven’t been eating much.” I poked her hip bone, which was more prominent than it had been since she got hurt before and after the ball. “You’re all sharp again. I don’t even get to enjoy throwing you around more easily.”

“0/10. Do not recommend,” she said, trying to be serious, which made me laugh more. I rolled over so I was above her. Before I could say anything, she reached up and pressed her palm against my cheek. “I love you, Adrik. More than I ever thought possible.”

Chapter Three Hundred Twenty-Seven

Adrik

Trino stopped by the building two days later. He was leaving for Colombia and wanted to say goodbye before leaving. His guys stayed in the lobby once again, which put everyone slightly on edge.

“Miha, you look better each time I see you,” he said walking to give her a hug.

“Maybe I'll have the use of both arms the next time I see you,” she said.

“You and Jefe must come to Colombia once this is all oves with. Have you ever been to Colombia?” She shook her head no. “Well, then, you must come. I'll be your tour guide. It's a beautiful country, Miha. You'll love it there.”

“I'm not moving there, Trino,” she said, flatly. He laughed, shaking his head.

“How's Martin?” I asked.

“He's fine. He got a little roughed up when he escaped, but it's nothing he can't handle. He has no one to blame but himself for it anyway, so I'm somewhat glad he didn't escape unharmed. We're going to have a very long talk when I get back,” he said, thoughtfully.

“Good. He was likely coming from a good place, but he also clearly doesn't have the experience you do when it comes to dealing with certain people,” I said. I somewhat expected Sephie to chime in, but she stayed quiet. I glanced quickly at Andrei, to see his eyes somewhat glazed over. While Sephie could pick up on things about people without anyone noticing, Andrei was still obvious about it. I knew there was more to be revealed about this situation, but if Sephie didn't say anything before Trino left, I wasn't going to either and Andrei decided to keep his mo uth sh ut as well.

We talked for a few more minutes. Trino promised to send video of Massimo when he finally threw him off a cliff. I wanted him to keep me informed of what was going on with the Mexicans. It still worried me that they were working with Ricardo. More so for Trino's safety than anything. They wanted Trino gone and they were bold with Ricardo behind them. It was a volatile situation. Even more than the situation with the other bosses and

Once Trino left the penthouse, I looked at Andrei, then to Sephie. “What do you two know?” I asked.

Andrei looked at me, surprised. “How do you know we know something?” he asked.

“Much like Misha, you get a certain look on your face when you're getting something. I can't see it with Sephie, but given that she stayed quiet, it likely means there was something she didn't want to say,” I said.

Andrei laughed. “I'm going to have to work on that,” he said.

“Not me. I don't care,” Misha said, grinning.

Sephie looked at Andrei. “I want to know what you got first, Bubba.”

“When Boss said that Martin was likely coming from a good place. That's not right. There's something deeper to why Martin went to the Mexicans,” Andrei said.

“Something deeper like there's going to be a split between those two in the future?” I asked.

Andrei thought for a moment, then looked to Sephie like he was asking for help. “You don't need my help, Bubba. You're doing just fine on your own. You can ask for clarity. I do all the time. When something comes in, ask a silent question, and wait for the answer. It'll come,” she said.

He inhaled deeply, thinking more on the situation. He started to say something, then stopped himself and thought for a moment longer. Finally, he said, “it depends on how Trino handles this when he gets back. Martin isn't happy with him, but I can't figure out why. That's why he went to the Mexicans. It has the potential to be bad, but it's going to be bad for Martin, I think.”

I looked to Sephie, who was smiling at Andrei. “See, you're getting more details. It'll get easier each time,” she said. She then looked at me, saying,

“it's not dissimilar to what's going on here. Martin is drunk on thoughts of grandeur, if you will. He's getting it in his head that he can run things better than Trino can. The situation with the Mexicans probably scared him, but depending on how Tring handles this, he'll either remember his place on his own or he'll be so angry with Trino that he'll go back to the Mexicans out of spite. Or he'll try to split from Trino and create his own empire, Only one of those options is going to result in him living much longer.”

I sighed. I appreciated her keeping her mo uth sh ut on this one. I didn't necessarily want to get in the middle of this, I would support Trino, whatever happened, but he needed to handle this or it would never really be resolved.

“It's always the people who seek power the most fervently who can't handle it,” Stephen said.

“Because they're the ones looking for fulfillment outside of themselves. Something is missing from their soul and instead of seeking the answer to what's missing and why, they seek a band-aid to cover up their pain. People will commit unspeakable horrors trying to escape having to face their own shadow,” Sephie said. I walked to her, pulling her to me. I could feel her body starting to shake slightly as she leaned against me. Instead of continuing on with this conversation, she changed the subject by asking me to help her take her arm out of her sling. “I'm tired of my arm being strapped down all day long,” she said.

“Your shoulder doesn't hurt you as much now?” Andrei asked.

She shook her head no. “It's still sore, but I think it's sore from not moving at this point.”

“That's likely. It's a good sign if you're feeling like you want to move it, but you should still go slow. Your shoulder was completely out of socket, which meant there was a lot of soft tissue damage. You can easily re-tear something,” he said.

“Nobody wants that. I just don't want to be strapped down for like 20 minutes,” she said.

“As soon as you can go longer periods without it in the sling, we can do some physical therapy to help you strengthen your shoulder again. You don't have much longer and the cast comes off too,” Andrei said. It was evident on his face that he was looking forward to being able to get her back in the gym to train once more. He took his job as her trainer very seriously. He was quite good at it. I knew she would be back in shape quickly.

“Just as long as her lung is healed. Her shoulder and arm are healing faster than her lung,” I said. Andrei looked to Sephie and smiled at her, like he knew something. She nodded her head, then pulled my arm around her, leaning back against me once more.

Chapter Three Hundred Twenty-Right

Adik

taber that night, once we were alone again, I asked Sephie about her and Andre’s silent exchange that morning. She laughed, telling me the was starting to understand Stephen’s aversions to being read. “Bubba picked up on the getting scared by not being able to catch my breath. He and Misha winced me to tell you I didn’t want to at first because I the ou’d be worried about touching me at all and I didn’t want that. They gave me

the male perspective, which was helpful”

“Tm glad they convinced you to tell me. Although I don’t know how I feel about Andrel’s ability to read you. It seems to be working best on you right now,” I said, helping her into bed.

“I don’t think it will always be that way. He’s getting his confidence from ne right now. Once he’s more confident, it’ll get better with everyone, but he’ll also have to learn how to turn it off. Like with Stephen, I know insanely private, so I tend to turn it off with him. Only little things here and there with him.”

I thought for a moment. “He is much more private than even Ivan is now that you say that.”

She sighed. “Ivan is private because he just doesn’t want to drudge up the past. It’s over and done with and he doesn’t want to have to relive it by telling someone about it. But he’s also handling it. Like, it doesn’t bother him day to day. When big stuff happens, it comes back, but he’s learning new ways to cope and it’s helping him overall.” She waited for me to lie down, then she rolled over to face me. “Stephen, though. He has something in his past that’s just as dark and traumatic as Ivan, except he’s not dealing with it. Something happened to him as a kid and he’s kept that part of his life locked up tight. It’s partly why he turns so sadistic and violent when he gets pushed past his limit. It’s one of the universe’s little jokes on us, When you ignore something, instead of it going away, it gets stronger. Hy shutting that part of his life away, he’s basically been feeding the monster inside him. It’s grown. He’s going to have to deal with it at some point or the monster will consume him. For now, he can control it and we only see glimpses of it when he’s angry, which rarely happens. But if he doesn’t make fjends with his beast, the beast will take over.”

I inhaled, thinking back to what the acupuncturist had told me about Ivan, Sephie, and me. “The acupuncturist told me that you, me, and Ivan were older than the rest of them. Misha is in the middle. He’s older than the other guys, but not as old as us. Knowing Stephen, he signed up for the hardest lessons first.” She giggled, nodding her head in agreement.

“Andrei’s the youngest,” she said. “She told me the same thing. She said nobody expected Andrei to figure out he was like me in this lifetime, but he did. I think that’s also partly why he’s more attached to me right now. He might’ve scared himself.”

“Did she say anything about Stephen? She told me they all have gifts and we’re supposed to help them discover them.”

Sephie looked at me, curious. “When did she tell you that?”

“The first time she worked on you after you and Ivan were taken. You were talking with Ivan and she came to me to tell me all this. She told me you and Ivan couldn’t hear us. It was like we had left the room, but when she stepped away from me, you saw me again and I could hear you talking to

Ivan.”

She smiled. “That’s a handy trick,” she said, thoughtfully. “What else did she tell you?”

“That you needed the most help with your pain, just as I needed the most help with my anger. She said your soul was showing me where you needed help by allowing me to feel your pain. And that you still don’t feel completely safe being totally vulnerable when you’re hurt.”

She sighed. “I know I’m doing it, but I don’t know how to stop trying to hide my pain from you.”

“You don’t have to now that I can feel it. Although I’m still not sure why I couldn’t feel anything from your lung. But I can feel what your shoulder feels like and what your ribs feel like.”

“You didn’t feel anything from my lung because there’s nothing to feel. I only felt pain when I was in the hospital from my lung. You’re not missing anything,” she said, smiling sweetly at me. She had a quiet way of instilling confidence in every one of us. Even me.

“I did miss that it scared you, though,” I said. “You’re still able to hide that one from me, but luckily, I have backup now. What you can hide from me, you won’t be able to hide from Andrei.” She giggled, burying her face in my chest.

“I’m in deep sh it now,” she said, still laughing.

It was almost two weeks later and Trino finally sent the video of Massimo’s overly dramatic death. He really did light him on fire, but as it turns out, he didn’t have to push him off the cliff Massimo pimped on his own, trying to get away from the flames that engulfed him. I shared the video with the guys, but Sephie skipped watching it. She could hear it while everyone else watched and she said that was enough for her Her memory was so good that I understood why she didn’t want to have that seared into her fave images

1 called Trino later that evening to ask about Martin and to give him an update on tal and Picando We’d had people in Italy watching them for us. Niko and Vito were still with them They were definitely planning, we host weren’t entirely sure of their plans.

“How’s Martin, Trino” I asked after we had laughed about Massimo.

He sighed heavily. “I thought we were okay when I first got back. He was nervous about almost not making it out of Mexico. I thought it was going to be enough, but he’s back to thinking there’s another way of dealing with them. He’s been questioning my business practices as well.”

“Trino. I know you already know this, but he needs to remember his place. He’s either going to go back to the Mexicans and get himself killed or he’ll try to split from you and run his own business. Both of those options are not going to end well for him. If he tries to split and he comes to me, he’ll meet the same fate as Anthony and Lorenzo.”

“I know, Jefe. I’m trying to get him to use some common sense, but he’s not thinking right now,” Trino said. “My guys are oddly sympathetic toward him, as well.”

Sephie had walked up beside me, tucking herself into my side while I talked to Trino. The call was on speaker so she could hear as well. “I’ve put you in a very tough spot right now. Trino, and I apologize for that. You need to be careful how much you say in front of your men. If you tell Martin he’s going to d ie if he chooses to leave you, your men will turn against you once that happens. I did not peg them as being ultra-religious, but they clearly art. They’re obviously fine with lighting someone on fire and throwing them off a cliff, but knowing what will happen in the future is a clear line in the sand for them. I don’t understand it, but that’s where they’re at. They’ll likely go through extensive me ntal gymnastics to blame it all on me,

but you’ll be guilty by association. That’s where I see this going.” she said.

“I didn’t even tell them everything about you saving Martin,” Trino said quietly.

“It doesn’t matter. They saw enough that they know. Or they think they know. But take it as a blessing. If this was enough to cause their loyalties to waver, they were never loyal to you in the first place, Trino,” she said.

We could hear Trino cursing in Spanish on the other end. “You’re absolutely right, Miha. It seems I have some housekeeping to do.”

After I hung up with Trino, Ivan looked at Sephie, his sly smile across his face. “Princess, you really were made for this shi t.”

“Called it,” Misha said, pointing at Sephie.

“Stephen was also right. I know how people react to things they don’t understand. Even without knowing things I’m not supposed to know, I could’ve called this one,” she said.

Chapter Three Hundred Twenty-Nine

Adrik

The day we were all waiting for was finally here. It had been long enough that Sephie was finally getting her cast off. She’d been making steady progress with her shoulder and was able to move her arm as much as the cast would allow. Her ribs were getting better as well and only caused a dull ache most of the time. She said she felt like she was starting to be able to breathe better finally, too. We were all looking forward to this trip to the hospital for once.

“One more x-ray before the cast comes off, Sephie. I want to take another look at your lung, as well. How has your breathing been since you finished the antibiotics?” Dr. Williams asked.

“It’s getting better. My ribs don’t hurt as much anymore so it’s easier to take deeper breaths,” she said.

“Good. We should be able to get the cast off today and send you on your way,” he said.

The x-ray wasn’t a problem at all for her this time. She hadn’t even worn the sling to the hospital. Most days, she left it off for almost the entire day. Andrei had been helping her do little exercises to help strengthen her shoulder again. Occasionally, she would wear the sling after a session with him because her shoulder would be extra sore. But she usually only wore it for a few hours and then it would come off again.

Dr. Williams walked back into the exam room with power tools. “So, the good news is that the cast can come off,” he said, walking toward Sephie. Ivan instinctively took a step closer to her when he saw the electric saw in his hands. She leaned into me, her eyes wide.

“Um, what’s the bad news, doc?” she asked. I could feel her starting to get nervous.

“I have to use this to take the cast off,” he said, holding up the saw. She immediately looked at me, her fear evident, as Dr. Williams went about setting up the saw.

“You’ve never had a cast removed before, solnishko?” I asked her in Russian.

“I’ve never had a cast before,” she replied.

“Did not expect that,” Ivan said.

“It’ll be okay, spider monkey. He just uses the saw to cut through the outer plaster layer. The rest will slide off your arm,” Andrei said, trying to calm

her nerves.

“Keep your eyes closed, love. It’ll be over quickly,” I said, running my hand up and down her back to try and keep her calm. I wanted her to keep her eyes closed just in case her eyes decided to go dark, too. So far, it seemed like the doctor had missed that phenomenon and I wanted to keep it that

way.

She shut her eyes tight, hiding her face in my shoulder while she lifted her arm to give the doctor access. I glanced up at Ivan, who was trying not to laugh at her. We had all assumed she’d broken bones before, especially given her history. It was completely unexpected that she would be terrified to get the cast off, but I could easily feel her terror growing as the doctor started to saw the cast off. It looked like Ivan cold too, as he clearly bristled once the saw turned on. His face went deadly serious as he watched the doctor like a hawk.

Thankfully, it was over after just a few minutes and the doctor pulled the last of the cast off her arm gently. She sighed, but didn’t move her face from my shoulder immediately. I could still feel her fear, but it was slowly lessening. I grabbed her left hand for the first time in weeks, my thumb tracing circles on the back of her hand. That was finally enough to get her to look up. Her fear disappeared quickly and I felt her warmth spread over my entire body as she felt her hand in mine for the first time. She looked up at me, her sweet smile across her face.

Dr. Williams turned around from putting the saw aside and said, “it’s going to be sore for a few days while you remember how to use it, but your bone healed quite well. Your ribs are looking better as well, but they’re still going to need a little more time to heal completely, so nothing too strenuous for a couple more weeks. Your lung looks nice and clear as well, so I shouldn’t need to see you again as long as that stays the same.” He nodded to everyone in the room and walked toward the door.

*Thanks, doc,” Ivan said. Once the doctor had left the room, he looked at Sephie, smiling. He opened his arms to her, saying, “come here, princess, I’ve been waiting for this.” She stood up and wrapped both arms around him, laughing. “I see now why you told me so often that my one-armed hugs

socked. They really do suck,” he said, holding her tightly.

“Let us be gone

from this place,” she said, stepping back from Ivan. She held her hand out to me, as I stood up.

“We should celebrate,” Misha said.

“Vinny’s for lunch? Stephen asked as we were leaving the hospital. We still attracted attention walking through the hospital, despite Sephie not looking like she’d just survived death. The guys knew she was still sensitive about it and didn’t particularly care for the unwanted attention. They just silently moved in closer around us so it was harder for anyone to see her. I’m sure the Russian didn’t help people to not stare, either.

“Can we actually go there?” Sephie asked.

Viktor looked at her, smiling the sweet smile that was reserved only for her. “Of course, sestrichka. We can go wherever you like,” he said. Her smile that made the world a brighter place stretched across her face.

“I haven’t been anywhere in so long. This is going to be awesome,” she said.”

1 caught Misha’s eye when she mentioned not being able to go anywhere. I knew he was about to order me to go to the house. “After lunch, we should go to the house for the rest of the week,” I said, grinning at Misha, who looked surprised that I had caught on. And maybe slightly disappointed that he wouldn’t be able to give me an order this time.

“Really?” she asked as she climbed into the backseat. She rarely needed help with anything anymore. While I was happy that it meant she felt better, I was finding myself a little disappointed that she didn’t need my help so much. I’d become accustomed to helping her and I found myself really loving that she let me.

“Really,” I said, sliding into the backseat beside her. I reached over and pulled her tight against me. She was practically in my lap, enjoying the fact that there was no cast in the way anymore.

“Best day ever,” she said, using both arms to pull my arms around her once again.

Unbeknownst to Sephie, when I had the guys pick up warmer clothes for her, I had them get double of everything. Since we had to cut the sleeve off most of her shirts, she was going to need new ones once the cast came off. The complete shirts were sent to the house, waiting for her cast to come off. She was still wearing my sweatshirt, but she was missing a sleeve underneath.

When we got to the house, I pulled her with me to the bedroom. Once we were alone, I pulled my sweatshirt off her. “I like where this is going,” she said, grinning at me. Her lung was getting better, but I had decided to let her tell me when she was ready. I’d scared her once and I was not planning on scaring her again. I pulled her one-sleeved shirt off and walked to the closet to get her a new one.

“Where did that come from?” she asked when she saw the new shirt in my hand.

“I had them get extras. I knew we’d have to cut the sleeve off of some of them, but I also knew you’d need complete shirts once the cast came off,” 1 said.

“You think of everything,” she said quietly. She took the shirt from me and put it on. “Look, I can dress myself!” she said laughing. She noticed the disappointment I was feeling at her not needing my help as much. She pulled me to her, her eyes searching mine to find the reason for my shifting mood. Her sweet smile on her face, she said, “I will always need you.” She wrapped both arms around my neck, then said, “I want to try something.”

“Want to try what?” I asked, pulling her tight against me. It felt so nice to be able to feel her body against mine once again. “As long as it doesn’t involve you any farther away than this, I’m in,” I said, smirking at her.

“It does not,” she said, standing on her toes to kiss me. The kiss started gently, almost timidly. I knew she was testing her lung capacity, so I let her dictate how deeply she kissed me. She pressed her body into mine, tightening her hold on my neck, as she increased the passion in her kiss. Her tongue exploring, making it more difficult for me to control myself. I could hear her breathing, but she didn’t stop. I ran my hands over her back, down to her ass. Like she read my mind, she jumped and wrapped her legs around my waist.

She was making it incredibly difficult to control myself. I leaned my head back, stopping the kiss. I wanted to see how well she was breathing. She was out of breath, but she said, “I’m okay.”I looked at her skeptically. She laughed at me, squeezing me with her legs. “It’s better this time,” she said. “T out of breath, but it feels like I can catch my breath easier.”

I put my hand on the back of her heck, pulling her to me once more, I kissed her passionately, but quickly. “I think we should still take it slow. As much as I hate to say those words out loud…” I said.

She laughed, unwrapping her legs from my waist. “I don’t disagree. But at least now I know I won’t hyperventilate when you kiss me like that. I’ve missed that,” she said. She turned so her back was to me. She pulled my arms around her waist, leaning back against me. “I can’t wait to go to bed tonight. I can finally lay across your chest again,” she said. It was such an innocent thing to say, but I felt my breath hitch at the thought of it. God,

I’ve missed her.

Chapter Three Hundred Thirty

Sephie

“How much work do you have today? Can we go for a walk or do you want me to drag one of the guys with me instead?” I asked Adrik as we were walking down the stairs.

“I will go with you, but you need a jacket,” he said, stopping me from walking down another step. He pulled me back toward the bedroom once more to get the jacket that I hadn’t thought about.

“I like where this is going, too,” I said, grinning at him. I heard him curse under his breath as we walked back up the stairs.

“You are not making this easy on me,” he said, shaking his head.

Once downstairs, I realized that it’d been so long since we were at the house that there likely wasn’t very much food there. “Can I send someone to get groceries?” I asked Adrik as we walked into the kitchen.

“You can do whatever you like, solnishko,” he said, following me to the kitchen island.

“What about me cooking? Am I still banned from that? You guys said I was banned until I had use of both arms again.” I held up my left arm. “I can use it again, so the ban should be lifted, right?”

He smiled at me. “Only if you let us help you,” he said.

“Deal.” I said, right as Stephen walked into the kitchen.

“What kind of deals are being made?” he asked.

“I can cook now as long as I let you guys help me,” I announced.

“Oh, Viktor is going to be so happy. VIKTOR!” he yelled at the top of his lungs, which made me jump and laugh at the same time. All of the guys came rushing toward the kitchen like something was definitely wrong. Ivan and Andrei had their guns drawn, even. Stephen was standing there quietly waiting on them.

“What’s wrong? What happened??” they all asked urgently once they saw Adrik and I in the kitchen as well.

“Sephie can cook again,” Stephen said, his sly smile stretching across his face.

Viktor’s deep belly laugh filled the kitchen as he walked over to me and picked me up in a bear hug. “This really is the best day ever,” he said, spinning me around once.

“We have to help her, since she’s still not 100%, but somehow I don’t think anyone will mind,” Stephen said.

“I’ll do everything. Whatever it takes,” Misha said. I couldn’t stop smiling at how happy they were about this new development. I made a quick grocery list, handing it to Viktor. I knew this was one task he would happily take care of. Adrik announced that we were going for a walk and would be back shortly. Once we were outside and alone, he was still laughing at Viktor’s reaction. “He really does love it love it when you cook for us,” he said, shaking his head.

“Because it’s his language,” I said, grabbing Adrik’s hand as we walked.

“What do you mean?”

“Viktor goes around quietly making sure we all have everything we need, that your schedule is always taken care of, that the building is secure, the vehicles are taken care of, food is ordered, he does everything. It’s how he shows his love. Me cooking for you guys is that for him. It’s the way I show my love for all of you, but it’s his language. He understands it, without anyone having to say the words. The other guys love it too, just as you do, but for Viktor, it’s silent recognition of everything he does for us returned back to him,” I said.

“He does make sure everything and everyone is always taken care of. He’s so good at it that sometimes I forget he does it all,” Adrik said.

I smiled at his somewhat worried expression. “I don’t think you should feel bad about that. That’s what he wants. He wants it all to appear effortless and mostly it is, because he’s set the systems in place for it to be effortless.”

Adrik cut his eyes over at me. “I think Trino is right. You know too much,” he said, grinning at me.

“I can keep going.” I said, my own grin stretching across my face.

“Please do. Your insights are always fascinating.”

“It’s also a replacement for the what ifs he’s been plagued with ever since his wife and child were killed. He spends more time than he’ll ever admit thinking about what could have been and the almost life he lived. In the beginning, it was painful to think about. Now, he’s healed enough that it’s more curiosity to think about what might have been. Coming home at the end of the day to a home-cooked meal helps him complete his vision for that almost life.”

“Has he talked to you about this, solnishko?” Adrik asked.

“Nope. I didn’t know about his wife and child until that night that they all found out I can’t have kids. That’s the only time he’s mentioned her around me. I haven’t asked either. I really do try not to pry in anyone’s head, but I’ve picked up on a few times when he’s been thinking about her. I pieced together the rest.”

Adrik walked a few moments in silence. He was thoughtful about what I’d just told him. “Is he still bothered by it?” he asked.

“Not that I can tell. There’s some understandable sadness there. I think that’s why I pick up on it, but I don’t feel like he’s still struggling with feel more like he tries not to think about it too much. I’m guessing he struggled with it when it first happened?”

Adrik nodded his head. “Yeah, I don’t think you’ve ever seen Viktor get truly angry, but he almost lost his grip on sanity for a while there. He was consumed by revenge, which as you know eventually led to his landing himself in the Syrian prison. Honestly, it was a suicide mission for him. He didn’t expect to live through it. We’d tried to talk him out of it. We thought we had talked him out of it, but he left in the middle of the night without a word to the rest of us. Ivan was pi ssed. It almost ruined their friendship completely. They had a few heated arguments after we got Viktor out,” he said.

“Really?” I asked. Viktor and Ivan seemed very close. I couldn’t imagine them ever fighting each other.

Adrik nodded. “Ivan knew that Viktor was trying to get himself killed. Like drug use, Ivan has very strong opinions on suicide. Very strong. He told Viktor if he ever thought about doing anything like that again to let him know. Ivan would put a bullet in his head for him instead of putting everyone else’s life in danger.”

“Savage. But also, partly true.”

“Ivan’s never been in love, though. He doesn’t understand the he ll that Viktor was in after having lost his wife and his unborn child. He’s gotten closer to understanding it since you came into our lives. Ivan had a conversation with me about it shortly after we got back from Italy. He said he owed Viktor an apology because he was starting to understand how he felt after his wife was killed. He said what happened on the plane over, when you didn’t recognize him and then when you were in your nightmare and kept yelling for me, then him, gave him a glimpse someone you love.”

“I had no idea I had that much of a negative effect on him during all that,” I said.

what it was like to lose

“Not just him. All of them. Even Stephen. I think it was the first time they all realized how much you mean to them and the first time they’d had to come to terms with the possibility of losing you. You were in so much pain that you probably didn’t notice, but during the first few days when you were asleep more than not, they each went through he ll. They would come in to check on you when you were asleep in just your shirt, on top of me. They all saw how badly you were hurt, but they couldn’t do anything about it. This time was just as difficult for them, but they were able to help you much more. They were happy to move you, to let you sleep on them, to make food for you. It all helped them process the pain of thinking we’d lost you. I saw how much they doted on you. It helped them get through this time much easier than after the ball.” He had stopped walking and was standing in front of me, his hands in the usual battle with my curls.

“That’s why you’re so sad that I’m able to do more stuff on my own again,” I said. It all made sense now. He placed his warm palm against my cheek. his thumb rubbing lightly back and forth. He had a small smile on his lips as he looked in my eyes, like he was lost in them. “I will always need you.

Adrik,” I said, firmly. His s*xy smirk that I adored appeared on his face as he leaned down and kissed me gently, his palm still on my cheek. I smiled against his lips. “You regularly take my breath away with your kiss, but sometimes the sweet ones can completely turn my insides to go,” I said, shaking off the goosebumps he had caused.

“Noted,” he said, laughing at my antics.

“Let’s go back. I’m getting cold,” I said. He grabbed my hand and turned to walk back to the house “Nope,” I said, stopping him. He turned to look at me, confused. “I’m the go ddamn princess. I don’t walk back to the house.” I walked behind him, jumping on his hark. He bounced me higher and kept a tight hold of my legs as he walked us back toward the house, clearly amused with me. I pushed my warmth to him as we walked, knowing he would know I was thinking about how much I loved him.

“Did you walk too far, spider monkey” Andrei asked when he say I hitched a ride back.

“Nope. She’s the go ddamn princess. She doesn’t walk back to the house,” Adrik said, laughing.

“Solid line of thinking, gazelle. You don’t want to waste too much energy and not be able to cook later. I fully support this decision,” Misha said,

grinning at me.

“See? Misha gets it,” I said, pointing at him as Adrik walked us by the couches. He walked to the kitchen, setting me down on the counter while made coffee.

“This will help you warm up.” he said, eventually handing me a warm cup of coffee.

“And make sure I have enough energy to cook,” I said, grinning at him.

“I support this!” Misha yelled from the other room.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 331

Chapter Three Hundred Thirty-One

Sephle

That evening, while I was making dinner for the first time in what felt like months, the guys were noticeably happier. Being at the house wasn't just good for me, it was good for all of them, too. We were able to relax, away from everyone else. We didn't need to worry about being overheard during any conversation. The house staff was minimal and they were all gone by the end of the day. The guards outside stayed outside and they always stayed far enough away from us that they couldn't overhear our conversations when we were outside. It had become the spot where we could get away from everything going on and just be ourselves.

While the guys were excellent at their jobs, they needed down time too. Where they didn't need to worry about some random person trying to get Adrik. Or me. No one knew about the house. I felt safe around the guys, but they felt safe at the house.

Viktor had brought his computer into the kitchen while I was cooking, but I made him put it away. "One night, Papa Bear. One night with no work. Or at least until dinner is over. You all need a break," I said, pulling the ingredients for dinner out of the refrigerator. He started to argue with me, but I made my eyes go dark and stared at him.

"I don't know how i feel about your demon eyes, sestrichka. I know you're just doing it to be a shi t, but you do look scary," Viktor said, his deep belly laugh filling the kitchen.

"That's kind of the whole point, Viktor," I said in a very loud whisper, making him laugh even more. His loud laugh was one of my

favorite sounds.

Adrik was close by, leaning against the counter, his arms crossed across his chest. Misha was helping me, Andrei was also close by, ready to jump in when I needed him. Ivan and Stephen were across the island, laughing and talking with Viktor. I caught myself looking at everyone and couldn't help the smile that stretched across my face. Adrik walked up behind me, kissing my neck softly. "What are you smiling about, solnishko?" he asked quietly.

"This really is the best day ever. We all needed this today," I said, turning toward him so I could look at him. He looked relaxed and happy as we all laughed and talked in the kitchen.

"We needed a reason to celebrate," he said, pressing his lips against mine gently.

They all talked more during dinner than they had in a while. It was obvious that they were all more relaxed than they had been since Ivan and I were taken. I knew the guys were stressed to see me hurt again, but I didn't realize just how stressed they'd been over it. We'd all had to deal with quite a lot over the last few weeks.

Later that night, once Adrik and I were alone, he brought it up as well. "I had us come here because I knew it would help you, but I think it helped all of us," he said, taking his shirt off and putting it on me for the night.

"You noticed too, huh?" I asked, watching him while he buttoned up his shirt on me.

He nodded his head. "You're lighter, but I think everyone is lighter too. I knew the guys were getting stressed, but I didn't realize just how stressed they were."

"They've been too busy babysitting me," I said, grinning up at him.

He wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling me tight against him. "Don't apologize for that, either. They would happily do it again. They like babysitting you more than pretty much anything else they have to do. You didn't hear the argument that happened when we made their rotation schedule after the meeting with Henry," he said, smirking at me.

"They argued? Why would they argue?" I asked.

"There's an odd number of them. There's an even number of hours in the day," he said, clearly still amused at the memory.

"Shu t up."

"No, it's true. They argue like children sometimes," he said, laughing.

"I happen to love it about them. I always wanted to know what it was like to have brothers. Now I know," I said.

"You're biased, though, solnishko," he said. "You love them no matter what. And it's usually you that they're fighting over. I sometimes have to remind them that you're mine."

1 tried not to laugh, but I couldn't hold it in. It was just such a funny picture in my head to think about. "I don't want to cause problems between all of you," I said. While he was also amused at it, I never wanted him to feel like there was any reason to feel jealous. For any reason. He was becoming much more sensitive to my moods shifting, so he picked up on my worry right away as he looked into my eyes.

1

"It's not a problem, Sephie. You shouldn't worry. They're big boys, Mostly. Just as long as I get the most time with you, they can fight as much as they like," he said, his s*xy smirk making me feel the warmth spread over my body.

"I love them all, but not like I love you, Adrik," I said. When I would think about how much I loved him, the warmth that spread through my body was a low-level rise in temperature. The warmth that was spreading over my body now was a raging inferno, but I knew it was mine and not coming from him. I inhaled sharply, looking up at him. I saw the surprise in his eyes, followed immediately by lust.

"Blink, love," he said. He was surprised to see my eyes go dark. I knew he could feel my warmth, but I wasn't sure he was feeling it at the level I was yet. I put my hands on his chest, trying to push the fire that was building inside me to him. I looked at him, chewing on my bottom lip.

"No."

He raised an eyebrow, but looked away. I knew he was struggling to control himself, especially since my eyes were dark. I put my fingers under his chin, forcing him to look at me again. "Sephie…" he said. I could hear the uncertainty in his voice. His hold on my waist was loosening, like he was fighting keeping me close and stepping away from me for fear of hurting me.

smiled at him, trying to keep my eyes as dark as possible. He cursed under his breath. "I don't know if I can control myself, solnishko," he said.

"Then don't try," I said as I ran my hand up his chest to the back of his neck. I pulled him down to me, my lips crashing into his. I felt his hands slide under his shirt to my bare skin. His touch was leaving a trail of fire across my skin. I knew I wouldn't be able to hold back either. While I was still wary of being able to catch my breath, I couldn't wait any longer.

His lips moved down my neck, making me moan quietly. "I've missed this so much, Sephie," he said. He ran his hands down my back to my a ss, picking me up. I wrapped my legs tight around him. My lips found his once more. I started to unbutton his shirt I was wearing as he held me up. I was desperate to feel his skin against mine. I let his shirt fall to the floor, my arms clinging to him once again.

He walked us toward the bed. He leaned his head back, so he could look at me. "Are you sure about this, love?" he asked. I could tell my eyes were definitely still dark by the look in his eyes. Seeing how much he wanted me made me want him even more.

"Positive," I said. I wasn't sure I would be able to hold myself back at this point.

"You have to tell me if you have trouble catching your breath. I don't want to scare you and I don't want to hurt you," he said, still uncertain.

"You won't," I said against his lips. That was all he needed to hear. He quickly climbed on the bed, with me still wrapped around him, so he was on top of me. His lips left a trail of fire down my neck, his hands burning my body with desire. I saw the look of satisfaction as he ripped my panties off. couldn't help but laugh. "You've been waiting for that, haven't you?" I asked,

He groaned. "For so long," he said, kissing my stomach. I ran my hands through his hair, enjoying the feeling of his facial hair tickling my stomach. He sat up on his knees, his hands on the zipper of his pants. "Okay, last chance. You're really sure you're okay?" he asked.

Chapter Three Hundred Thirty-Two

Sephie

1 sat up in front of him, smiling at him I knew he was worrieİ going to scare me if I couldn’t catch my breath again. I moved his hands out of the way so I could unzip his pants, pushing them down as far as I could I pushed him onto his back so I could pull his pants all the way off. He sat up, pulling me into his top. “This will help me keep control of myself.” he told as his fingers can lightly mer my fren, down my neck. “And I can see your eves,” he said, groaning when I tried to make them go darker Clearly that worked.

He grabbed me, pulling me against him as tight as possible. His breath caught as I pushed my hips into his. He was using mery bit of self control that be had to go slouch as he slid inside me I moaned londly, completely lost in feeling him fill me up. I looked at him as I started to move my hips against him. 1 sow a flash of surprise as he looked into my evos. “Keep looking at me,” he said, almost like it was an order. I found myself oddly turned on hit

His hands framed over my body, still igniting a fire beneath them. He couldn’t take his eyes away from mine. He was completely mesmerized by what he was seeing 1 had no idea how much my eyes being dark would captivate Mith. I could feel myself building, getting closer and closer to the edge. My breaths were fast and heavy, but I didn’t feel like I couldn’t catch my breath. I wanted more. I put my hands on his chest, pushing him down. Once he was flat on his back, 1 rolled him over so he was on top of me, my legs wrapped around him. He slammed into me hard one time, causing me to moan loudly. He waited to see how I reacted and whether I could catch my breath, then slammed into me again. I moaned again, grabbing his a ss, and pulling him into me. His thrusts became harder and faster as I felt myself inching closer to the edge.

He stayed above me, intent on watching my eyes the whole time. He was completely enchanted by whatever it was he was seeing. I felt my o*gasm start and { leaned my head back, closing my eyes for a moment. “No, don’t. Look at me. Please,” he said, almost begging. I opened my eyes again, looking at him as I felt my body explode in extreme pleasure. All my pain was gone. There was only him.

In the way that only he could, he drew my o*gasm out as long as possible, but his gaze never left my eyes. It was a new level of intensity for me, like

he was seeing all of me for the first time. I felt myself begin to come down, but just when I thought it was over, he thrust hard into me again, causing another round of pleasure. This time, I could feel him getting closer as well. He had told me before I was taken that I was able to basically share my o*gasm with him, letting him feel what I felt, which made it infinitely more intense for him. With him maintaining eye contact with me for so long, it was at a new level of intensity for me. I tried to be as open as I could, letting him feel everything I felt. No holding back. As soon as he felt another o*gasm start for me, he let go as well, exploding into his own wave of pleasure.

I reached up, holding his face in my hands and pulled him to me, kissing him gently. He rolled off me, pulling me with him so I could lay across his chest as we both worked on catching our breath. I gladly snuggled into him. His hand ran lightly over my back. “You’re amazing, Sephie,” he said. I chuckled, hugging him tightly. “Did you know what you were doing with your eyes?” he asked.

I rested my chin on his chest, so I could look at him. “I’m going to say no, since I have no idea what you’re talking about. They were just dark weren’

they?”

He laughed. “No. Well, yes. They were dark, but they were constantly changing colors. When your eyes go dark, it’s like the brown takes over and gets almost black. But the other two colors did it too this time. I’ve never seen it before. I could see the black fade away again like I did the other morning and your normal eyes come back too.”

“Now I know why you couldn’t stop looking at my eyes the whole time,” I said, smiling at the look of wonderment that was still on his face.

“I didn’t want to miss anything,” he said, smiling shyly. He brushed a curl from my face. “How’s your lung? You didn’t struggle to catch your breath?”

“It’s fine. I didn’t struggle at all, which bodes well for next time,” I said, grinning at him.

He wrapped his arms around me, holding me tightly. “I’ve missed you so much, solnishko.”

I woke Adrik up a few times during the night. I knew he’d been missing me, but I really didn’t realize how much I’d been missing him. Once the morning arrived, neither of us was ready to wake up. I felt his hand rubbing my back lightly when I woke up once more to see daylight streaming through the windows. I lifted my head, resting my chin on his chest. He opened his eyes, smiling at me. “Good morning, love,” he said sleepily. He reached up, brushing the curls from my face. “I’ve missed you sleeping on my chest. I think I slept better last night than I have in weeks.”

“It couldn’t possibly be due to me wearing you out every two hours,” I said, grinning at him.

“That did not hurt,” he said, his hands running down my body.

“Worth H,” I said, “I feel like I’m finally warm again. I’ve been cold since they took me and Ivan.”

“You have been freezing. I think that’s partly why you haven’t been able to sleep without someone next to you. It’s hard to tell if the shaking was your normal reaction to trauma or because you were cold,” he said.

“Probably both. I ha te being cold ”

“I noticed,” he said, grinning at me. He pulled me completely on top of him, holding me tightly. I groaned when I moved, feeling sore from our nighttime activiti “Are you just sore or did I hurt you?” he asked.

“Sore Gloriously sore,” I said, burying my face in his neck I felt his body vibrate as he laughed at my answer. He rolled over so he was on top of me. “Would a hot shower help” he asked. His boyish smile across his face. He was clearly happy that he was the reason for me being sore, which made him even more handsome than usual I caught myself just thinking about how much I loved every detail of him. His breath caught. “Do that again,” he

said

“Do what again?”

“You just made your eyes go completely blue.”

“I did?” I asked, completely surprised.

He nodded his head. “What were you thinking about just now?”

I smiled shyly at him. “How much I love every detail of you.”

I saw the look of surprise on his face. “They did it again. Instead of going dark, they’re completely blue.” He watched for a few more seconds, then said, “they just changed back to normal. The same way it happened when they’re dark. That’s what they were doing last night too.”

“Who needs a mood ring when you have ever-changing eye colors?” I said, laughing. This was a new development for me. I was only just beginning to be able to tell when my eyes would go dark, much less that they completely changed colors now.

Adrik cursed under his breath, but he looked completely hypnotized by my eyes once again. He leaned down and kissed me gently. “You never cease to amaze me,” he said. “Come, let’s shower. You’re not allowed around anyone else when you smell like s*x.”

“Bossy,” I said as we walked toward the bathroom. He stopped and looked back at me, as seriously as he could. “I’ll allow it,” I said, laughing. I grabbed his hand as we continued into the bathroom. I put my chin on his shoulder, whispering in his ear, “I kind of like it.” I laughed again when he cursed under his breath as he walked us into the shower, turning the water on, then turning to me and pulling me tight against him

Chapter Three Hundred Thirty-Three

Sephie

Once we tested the limits of the hot water supply with the excessively long shower, he was thoughtful as we were getting dressed. “I don’t want to tell the guys about your eyes i inging colors this time,” he said, very matter of factly.

I smiled at him as I was finally taming my hair on my own again. I walked over to him, placing my hands on his chest. I knew there was more to his request that he wasn’t saying. I searched his eyes for just a moment before finding the answer to my silent question. Since he told me they’d changed colors when I was thinking about how much I loved him before, I tried to make it happen again. I knew he was fine with me being around the guys, but with me being hurt for so long, plus Misha and Andel relying on me a little more than usual because of everything else going on, I think Adrik was starting to feel slightly jealous and protective of our relationship. It was etsy to think about just how much I loved him as I looked up at him. I could see the smile stretch across his face and I knew my eyes had changed once again. “It’ll be our little secret,” I said. He pulled me to him, wrapping his arms tightly around me. I knew he loved not having my giant cast in the way just as much as I did now. “What color were they this time?” I asked as I rested my head against his chest.

“Blue again.”

“Blue apparently means love for my mood ring eyes,” I said. “Is it the normal blue that’s always there? It just takes over the other two colors?”

“Basically. The blue that’s always there isn’t a normal blue eye color. It’s a much deeper blue. Like deepest depth of the ocean blue. It’s incredible. Not like my eyes that are normal blue,” he said.

I laughed, looking up at him. “Your eyes are deeper blue sometimes. Mostly when you’re having dirty thoughts about what you want to do to me.”

He smirked down at me. “It’s still not the same. It’s not a complete color change. Yours is a complete color change.”

I giggled. “It’s my warning system.” He laughed loudly. It was music to my ears, I grabbed his hand as we left the bedroom. “You have to tell me if my eyes are doing their own thing in front of other people. I’m only just now beginning to get a handle on when they go dark and they still surprise me with it sometimes. I had no clue they were coming up with even more tricks, but given that it seems to happen either when we’re having s*x or I’m thinking about how much I adore you, I think I can keep it under wraps.“

He stopped and pulled me back to him, a small smile on his lips. “I like having parts of you that are just for me,” he said.

“I know you do. I do too. I just need help making sure this one stays quiet. I can’t tell when it’s happening yet. I also need to figure out a way to keep Andrei from fishing around in my head and finding it,” I said. I chewed on my bottom lip as I thought about his newfound abilities.

Adrik kissed my forehead before continuing down the stairs. “Have you talked to him about turning it off yet? Like when you’re around Stephen?” he asked.

“No, I haven’t. I need to. Maybe I can find time today to get him by himself and have that conversation with him,” I said. “But I think on some level he likely already knows. He’s more discreet than you think. He’s known about Ivan’s past longer than I have.”

Adrik stopped on the stairs, turning toward me. He was clearly surprised to learn this bit of information. “How?” he aske step below me, I put my arms around his shoulders, running my hand through his still damp hair.

quietly. Since he was on the

“He said he figured it out a few years ago. He heard Ivan talking in his sleep one time after he got hurt. It wasn’t a time when he had to go to the hospital, but he said even just getting hurt used to bring Ivan’s demons back. He said everybody else was asleep, but he couldn’t sleep and he heard Ivan talking. He doesn’t know everything, but he knows enough of the details that he knows he really doesn’t want to know the rest,” I said.

“He never told anyone,” Adrik said, still surprised. His hands were holding my hips as he thought about what I’d just told him.

“Ivan doesn’t even know. He told me he knew how private Ivan was, so he just never brought it up. But it helped Andrei be more understanding when you guys would have to fight him in the hospital. He saw how much it affects Viktor. Even still, Viktor struggles with it,” I said.

“Viktor takes it personally. Those two have been with me the longest, therefore they’re the closest. I think he takes it as an insult that Ivan can’t see him when he’s in the hospital.”

goes, not much like Ivan coun’t understand the pain Viktor went through when he lost his wife and child, Viktor can’t understand the pain that Ivan went through when he was at that facility. He should be glad for that fact, honestly. Ivan’s seen evil to a level that not many people have. Or should I thought for a moment, still running my fingers through Adrik’s dark hair. “But from Viktor’s point of view, Ivan is one of the people Viktor loves most in this would and Viktor shows his love through helping people, with whatever they need. Viktor feels rejected, even though it’s got nothing to do with him and everything to do with Ivan’s past. Because of Viktor’s past with his wife, he clings to the people he loves. Maybe more than be should, bu understandable. He might be a giant and look like he could kill you with his mind, but Viktor is incredibly sensitive underneath that menacing exterior. When he finds another woman that catches his eye, I will murder her if she takes advantage of that.”

Adrik looked at me, smirking, when I said the last sentence. I recognized the look in his eye and knew my eyes had changed. I raised an eyebrow, silently asking what color they were this time. “Demon eyes for added emphasis,” he said, laughing.

“These things are going to get me in so much trouble,” I said as we continued down the stairs.

We could smell breakfast cooking as we walked to the kitchen. All the guys were already in the kitchen, working together to make breakfast for everyone. “You guys are making breakfast?” I asked as I walked into the kitchen. They all looked to me and Adrik, obviously proud of themselves.

“We didn’t want you to overdo it again, so we thought we’d take care of breakfast to keep you from feeling like you had to,” Ivan said.

“You’re still not completely healed, which means you’re still at high risk of getting pneumonia again,” Stephen said.

“And none of us want you to have to go back on antibiotics or start sleeping all the time again,” Viktor said.

“Because it’s so0000 boring without you around all the time,” Misha said, in the overly dramatic way that only he could.

*This

might make us regret our decision to not order out, but it’s the thought that counts, right?” Andrei said, grinning at me.

I looked at Adrik, who was also amused at their decision, as well as their explanation. I smiled at all of them. “I’m so impressed.”

“Maybe reserve judgment until after you try it,” Stephen said.

“Nah, Andrei was right. It’s the thought that counts,” Adrik said.

After breakfast, which was actually quite good, I went with the guys to the gym. I still wasn’t allowed to do anything yet, but at least they let me tag along. I wasn’t going to turn down the opportunity to watch Adrik get sweaty from lifting heavy things.

Andrei took the opportunity to do some very light exercises with me to help my shoulder. We’d been doing small things, even before I got my cast off. Since it was the only thing I could do, I was happy to continue. It also gave me a few minutes mostly alone with him. We were far enough away from the other guys that I brought up the subject of turning his newly discovered gift on and off.

“So, 1 feel like you already know this, but I also feel like we should discuss turning your newfound ability off around certain people. Like Stephen, who is very clearly uncomfortable with our ability to see inside his head. You don’t want to be rude about it,” I said, as he helped me with my exercises.

“I know, spider monkey,” he said, smiling at me. “This is about me figuring out you were scared, isn’t it?”

Chapter Three Hundred Thirty-Four

Sephie

“Kind of. Adrik appreciates you and Misha talking me into telling him about it,” I said. I took a deep breath, looking at him. “He’s always been fine with me being around you guys and I never want that to be an issue. With me being hurt for so long this time, he’s feeling a little jealous at having to share me with everyone for the first time. But at the same time, he’s also excited that you’ll be able to catch the things I can still get past him. It’s complicated “

Andrei glanced around, then put his hand up to stop me from saying more. “You don’t need to explain it to me, spider monkey. I don’t want to cause problems. Like you leveling up Misha, I think it works best with you right now, but that’s just because I need more practice. I’ll make sure Boss knows I won’t be nosey,” he said, smiling at me.

“I did tell him he shouldn’t worry too much about you, since you’ve known about Ivan’s past longer than I have.” It was my turn to glance around to make sure we were still far enough away from everyone else that we wouldn’t be overheard. “I am slightly worried about Stephen when it comes to both you and 1. He’s very nervous about us finding out anything he doesn’t want us to know. I don’t want to make that worse,” I said.

“I did notice that. I’ve tried to assure him that I’m not going to drop in his head unannounced,” he said.

“He’s definitely one that needs to come around in his own time. I think he’ll tell us whatever it is eventually, but I don’t think it will go well if he’s forced to have to tell us something he’s not ready to,” I said.

“You mean the way you’ve been forced to tell us everything you didn’t want to before you were ready?” he asked, giving me a sly smile.

Yeah, I wouldn’t recommend it. I mean, it’s effective, but it hasn’t been ideal,” I said, taking a deep breath. “Also? Can we talk about how frustrating it is for these simple exercises to make my shoulder hurt this much?” I noticed Adrik on his way to us and wanted to change the subject before he made it all the way to us.

“Your shoulder is still healing, spider monkey. It’s a delicate balance of taking it easy and challenging it enough that it keeps getting stronger,” he said, looking at me apologetically.

*Is she complaining she can’t do much still?” Adrik asked Andrei as he walked toward us. He walked to me, still breathing heavier than normal from his last set, the beads of sweat prominent on his forehead. He caught me staring at him, my mo uth slightly open, as he walked to me. His s*xy smirk on his face, I felt the pull in my chest that meant he was thinking about how much he loved me. He slid his arm around my waist, pulling me to him so he could kiss my temple. My mind wandered to the night before and how I still felt like I couldn’t get enough of him.

“She might be,” Andrei said, laughing. “But I’m guilty of doing that anytime I’ve been hurt, too. I think we all are.”

“Don’t give me shi t for it. It’s frustrating,” I said, defensively.

Adrik’s wide smile stretched across his face. “What? I might like extra spicy Sephie the most, too,” he said, holding me tighter against him.

“You boys better be careful what you wish for,” I said, letting my eyes go dark as I looked at both of them.

Adrik needed to go to his office the following day. I offered to go with him, but he said he only had a few meetings, then he would return. “I think we’re all enjoying being here so much that I don’t want you to have to leave just yet. This should be the only time I need to go back to the building for the rest of the week,” he said that morning while we were getting ready after they’d all hit the gym and I had lifted my five-pound weight a few times under Andrei’s watchful eye.

1 felt my own nervousness at the thought of being that far away from him. He’d been away from me since I was taken, but only a few floors away. We were still in the same building. Now, I was facing having to be completely away from him for a few hours. My body was clearly not happy with that decision. I felt the shaking start almost immediately. He noticed I was quiet and walked from the closet to the bed where I had sat down, asking what

was wrong.

“I don’t like the idea of being away from you,” I said before he made it all the way to me.

He chuckled, saying, “I don’t like the idea of being away from you either, but it’s just for a couple of hours.” He sat next to me, putting his arm around my shoulders. As soon as he touched me, he felt my body shaking. His eyes went wide as he looked at me. “Oh, you really don’t like the idea of being

away from me,” he said. He pulled me closer, rubbing my back to try and help the shaking calm down.

“I know it’s not healthy and I know at some point I need to get over it but the thought of not being in the same building as you terrifies me right now,” I said quietly. The more I thought about him being gone, the harder my body started to shake.

“It’s okay, Sephie. You’ll come with me. We’ll just come back here after I’m done. I don’t want to be apart from you either. I just didn’t want you to have to follow me around today,” he said, his hand alternating between playing with my curls and rubbing my back.

“I tend to get seriously hurt when we’re apart and I’m kind of tired of it,” I said. I could feel the tears starting to well in my eyes as he tightened his hold on me. I heard him inhale deeply, then curse under his breath.

“Sephie, you’re right. You’re absolutely right. I never put it together until now,” he said. He reached over and moved me into his lap in one motion. “You still need to eat more, for the record. That was way too easy,” he said, giving me a small smile. I tried to return the smile, but my body was still not happy with the thought of him being gone for any amount of time. He held me tighter, saying quietly, “don’t worry, love. You can even come to my meetings today if you want to. You can always come to my meetings. Neal is one of them. He’ll be excited you’re there.” I knew he was trying to make me laugh. They all knew that making me laugh helped me get a handle on my out-of-control emotions.

I wiped the tears that had managed to escape from my cheeks, looking at him. The look of surprise on his face when he looked at my eyes was enough to finally make me laugh. “What color are they now?”

He cursed in Russian. In fact, he said every curse word there was in Russian. I looked at him, confused. “Sephie, they’re a completely new color,” he

said.

“Shu t up.”

“No, go look. They’re kind of blue, but it’s not your normal blue color. It’s like ice blue now. Almost wh ite, love. This is scarier than your demon eyes,” he said.

I got up from his lap, walking quickly to the bathroom. I wasn’t sure how quickly they changed, so I was trying to beat them. When I looked in the mirror, I saw exactly what he had described. The normal three rings of color were gone and my eyes were almost wh ite, with just a hint of blue. Adrik had followed me into the bathroom to see my reaction. I just stood and stared at my reflection, almost like I didn’t recognize myself. “I’m gonna need contacts. I don’t know how long I’m going to be able to hide this if it keeps happening every time I have an emotional reaction.” I turned to look at him, trying not to smile. “Have you met me? Do you know how insanely emotional I am?” I asked, trying to be overly dramatic for effect.

He just laughed at me, pointing to the mirror again. When I looked this time, my eyes had changed to green. But it was the normal green that was there all the time. The green had just overtaken the brown and blue rings. It was much easier for me to recognize myself this way.

“Apparently, wh ite means fear and green means sarcasm,” he said as he wrapped his arms around me. “I can also have contacts made for you, if that’s what you want.”

“I don’t know how else to hide this. I don’t know it’s happening. I was only just starting to be able to tell when my eyes go dark and now they’ve just gone completely rogue and are out here freestyling. I said my stomach was untamed, but clearly it’s my eyes that are untamed,” I said,

Adrik pulled me to him, laughing. “We’ll talk about it more later. I said I didn’t want to tell the guys about it because I was feeling selfish when it comes to you. I never mind you around them. It’s not that. I only just got you back completely though. I didn’t want to, ire. We might not have a choice with that, though.” He took a deep breath, still thinking out loud, he said, “I don’t mind the guys knowing about this eventually, but I don’t know how I feel about anyone you talk to being able to see this. Contacts might be necessary in certain situations.”

“You mean so I don’t scare off all your business partners?” I asked, grinning at him. “What about Ghost? Didn’t he used to be the wealthiest guy in the city? Well, yeah, until he fell in love with this stone-cold weirdo who couldn’t control her emotions and scared everyone away. Now, everyone is afraid to do business with him.”

“That won’t happen, love,” he said, shaking his head at me. He grabbed my hand, pulling me with him out of the bathroom. He stopped briefly to send a text to Viktor, then grabbed my hand once more. He walked to the closet and grabbed my coat. “You’re going to need this,” he said. “It’s colder on the helicopter.”

I grinned at him. “You already arranged for the helicopter so you’d get home faster, huh?*

“Guilty,” he said, holding my coat up for me so I could put it on. He adjusted the collar, moving my hair out of the way, then pressed his cheek gently

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to my neck. “I’m secretly very happy that you’re coming with me today. I was not looking forward to being apart from you,” he said as he wrapped his arms around me, holding me tightly against him.

Chapter Three Hundred Thirty-Five

Sephie

That afternoon, while Andrei, Misha, and I were in the penthouse waiting on Adrik's meetings to end, Ms. Jackson called Misha to ask if she could see me. He gave her an excuse of not being with me, but said he would find me and call her back. Ms. Jackson said, "don't worry, son, I don't want her to come down here." Then she added very quietly, "it's about Giana." Misha promised to call her back in a few minutes after he found me and found out what my schedule was.

"Giana's been kept to her apartment since we got Armando, hasn't she?" I asked.

"She was, but they've recently let her go see Ms. Jackson, She's under heavy guard, though. She can't go anywhere on her own right now. She apparently threw a tantrum and threatened to kill herself and all kinds of nonsense, so they finally let her go see Ms. Jackson a few times a week just to shut her up." Andrei said.

"Huh. Wouldn't have guessed that would ever happen," I said, as sarcastically as possible.

"It's up to you if you want to deal with this or not. I can call Ivan, too. We'll go fetch her again if you want to see her. I can let Boss know, too," Misha said.

"Ms. Jackson wouldn't call if she didn't have something important. Does she know about Armando and what he did to me?" I asked.

"I don't think so. Nobody's told her. She called a few times when you were still hurt, but I told her we were away. I didn't think you'd be up for any kind of company," Misha said. He looked worried that I would be mad at him gatekeeping my nonexistent social life.

"You were right to do so, my adorable Russian guardian, I couldn't have handled talking to her before," I said, smiling sweetly at him. I thought for at minute. "I don't want her to come up here without Adrik knowing. He's feeling extra private lately and I want to make sure I honor that."

Misha quickly sent a few texts. "I told Viktor to talk to Boss about it. If he's okay with it, he'll send Ivan up and we can go fetch her." Viktor quickly replied, meaning Misha must've caught Adrik between meetings. He read the message, looking somewhat perplexed. "He said it's okay if she comes up, but not before he's done for the day. He wants to be here when you talk to her."

I smiled, knowing exactly why he wanted to be present. "Then Ms. Jackson can wait a little bit until he's done for the day. He doesn't have much longer anyway, does he?"

Andrei looked at his watch. "I think his last meeting should be starting shortly. I don't think they're going to see Armando today either. I think he wanted to go back to the house as soon as he was done."

"Whatever Ms. Jackson has to tell us shouldn't take too long. Only a slight change in plans," I said. I got off the couch, walking to the kitchen. "It does, however, mean that I'm gonna need a snack."

"No talking, gazelle. I'm not supposed to be with you," Misha said as he dialed Ms. Jackson's number to tell her when I'd be available.

I stood quietly while he had the conversation, trying not to laugh as I thought about how much it felt like we were doing something wrong. Once he ended the call, I asked, "I feel like we're kids making plans to sneak out of the house later. Why do I feel like we're about to be in trouble for lying?"

They both laughed at me. "You clearly never snuck out of the house when you were younger," Andrei said. "This is nothing, comparatively speaking."

"Fair. Totally fair. I was a good kid. I only snuck out when my life was in danger. That's completely different. Just know that I'm going to blame everything on you two when we get caught. That's what little sisters are supposed to do, right?" I asked, laughing at the thought.

"That's what my little brother always did, so that seems accurate," Andrei said.

"Bubba, i can't imagine you being a bad kid," I said, rummaging through the refrigerator.

"You should talk to my mom, then. She'll gladly tell you differently," he said.

turned to look at him, then to Misha. "I would expect this development from Misha, but not you. You're so thoughtful now. I just always assumed you would've been the same as a kid."

"Thoughtfully defiant," Andrei said, laughing.

"I was like you, gazelle. I was the good kid. My brothers and sister were the hellions in my family. I'm the angel," Misha said, giving me his most cherubic smile.

"Do your siblings hate you for that? Or are they just as adorable as you are?" I asked.

He walked to the kitchen, his phone in hand, to show me a picture of his siblings. I could tell they were related, but Misha got the best looks, by far. I looked at the picture for a moment, then looked to him. "They hate you," I stated.

He laughed loudly. "Yeah, they kinda do."

"What about you, Bubba? Is your little brother as handsome as you are?"

"I think he got all the looks. Must be a perk of being the youngest," he said. He got up and walked to the kitchen as well, to show me pictures of his brother. Andrei's brother was quite handsome, just in a different way from Andrei.

"Bubba, he's not better looking than you," I said, looking at the picture. Andrei's brother was similar in height to Andrei, but he weighed significantly less than Andrei did. "Look at him. What is he like 180 pounds soaking wet?" I asked.

Andrei laughed, which made Misha curious. He walked behind me so he could see over my shoulder. "That's a generous estimate, gazelle. I think you weigh more than he does and you're too skinny still."

Andrei took his phone back, flipping through a few more pictures, then showed us another picture of his brother. "He's a legit model, though," he said, showing us another picture of his brother.

"Okay, maybe it was standing next to you that made him look tiny. He doesn't look as small there, but he's still not prettier than you. I don't care what you say," I said.

"You're biased, spider monkey," he said, dismissively. "My brother always got all the girls when we were younger. It's kind of turned him into a dick. Max reminds me a lot of my brother."

"Ugh. That's a sad existence for your brother. He must be very empty," I said quietly.

Before Andrei could respond, Ivan walked into the penthouse. "Squish!" I said, walking to him to give him a hug.

"I didn't realize how much I missed two-armed hugs, princess," he said, holding me tightly.

"You and me both," I said. I kept my arm around his waist, leaning into his side.

"What kind of shenanigans are you three getting into now?" Ivan asked.

"We're comparing their siblings to see who's the hottest. Misha and Andrei are both clear winners in the genetic lottery," I said, causing Ivan to laugh loudly.

"Do you have siblings, Ivan?" Misha asked, curiously.

I felt Ivan tense beside me. I was just about to answer for him, but he said, "I do. I don't know where any of them are, though. I haven't seen any of them since I was 7." I looked up at him, silently asking if he was okay with this conversation. He gave me a wink and nodded his head.

Misha could tell it was sensitive territory, so he said, "plot twist, Ivan's siblings sent him away because he was too painfully good-looking and made them all feel bad." Ivan laughed, shaking his head at Misha. I smiled widely at Misha, silently grateful for his wit saving the day.

Adrik, Viktor, and Stephen walked into the penthouse, further saving Ivan from having to divulge more than he was ready to. Ivan heard the door

apen and gave my shoulders a sleeze, knowing I would want to go to Adrik. As soon as I saw him, I felt both the pull in my chest that was from him and my own warmth spreading over my body. I walked quickly toward him, unable to control the smile on my face, I saw the flash of surprise on his face, which likely meant my eyes had changed yet again, just before his lips found mine. He kissed me like it had been days since he'd seen me last, Instead of hours. He held me tighter against him as my knees threatened to give out, but stopped the kiss. He pressed his forehead to mine, one hand against my cheek, his thumb cubbing lightly against my skin. "I'm glad I didn't have to wait any longer for that," he said quietly. He stood up straight, so he could look at me I was worried my eyes were still different. I raised an eyebrow, silently asking him if I needed to blink. "Normal," he said quiet enough that only I could hear. I exhaled, clearly relieved, which caused him to laugh softly. "What's this about Ms. Jackson?" he asked loud enough that the guys could hear. He glanced up in Misha and Andrei's direction, but quickly looked back at me.

"She called earlier and asked if she could see Sephie. She said she didn't want Sephie to come down there and that she had something to tell us about Giana," Misha said.

Adrik tore his gaze away from my eyes and looked at the guys. "Two of you go down and fetch her. She can come here." Ivan and Misha walked toward the door to go get her. "Does she know what happened to you, solnishko?" he asked.

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Chapter 336

Chapter Three Hundred Thirty-Six

Sephie

“I don’t think so. You know how quick she is, though. She might suspect something has happened. Misha said she called a few times when I was still really hurt and asked to see me, but he always lied and said we were away. I’m sure she knows something is going on with Armando, if she hasn’t seen him in weeks. It’s anybody’s guess as to what Giana has told her about him,” I said.

“The guys that are on her said she never asks about him. Like literally not once.” Viktor said.

“I feel like that’s weird,” I said, turning toward the guys. Adrik kept his arms around me, pulling me back against him.

“It’s definitely weird,” Stephen said. “We know their relationship wasn’t at all what it appeared to be, but it did seem like there was genuine affection between the two of them. At least at first.”

“I would not have pegged her as someone who could lie so easily and so well,” Adrik said.

“Maybe like Armando, her id iot persona is just an act,” Stephen said.

Ivan and Misha returned with Ms. Jackson as we were all still discussing possibilities for who Giana really was. Ms. Jackson smiled at me when she walked in, but she immediately squinted her eyes, looking me up and down. “Something happened, child. You’re too skinny.”

“It’s a long story, Ms. Jackson,” I said, walking to her to give her a hug. I walked with her back toward the kitchen, where everyone else was and pulled out a chair for her to sit at the kitchen island. I walked back to Adrik, who opened his arm for me. “I am very curious what information you have for us about Giana?” I asked, leaning into Adrik. I was starting to feel nervous again and I didn’t like it. I was also now worried about my eyes changing in front of everyone. He felt my slight shift in mood and kissed my temple. His hand found its way under my shirt, his thumb rubbing my skin gently in an effort to keep me calm.

“I knew something had happened when I didn’t see her for a few weeks. She told me they were supposed to go to Italy at the end of last month, but I saw guards outside her door. Even an id iot would know that you don’t need guards outside your door if you’re gone to another country. I didn’t ask questions and I didn’t contact her. Then she showed up at my door a few weeks after that, almost like nothing had changed. She looked better. She’d clearly been forced to sober up while she was being kept to her apartment, but she acted like nothing was wrong the first few times she stopped by to see me. Only difference were the guards that never left her. I didn’t ask about them, either. For all I knew, Armando had finally gotten serious about his security. Well, last week, she finally came up with an excuse to step away from her guards for a few minutes. She brought clothes with her, saying she needed my opinion on what she should wear to some function she clearly made up. She called me back to the bedroom to ask for my help to zip up a dress. One of the guards came with me, but I told him in Russian that there was no way to get out of my apartment except through the front door and that she would be fine in there. Should’ve seen the look of surprise on his face,” she said, laughing. She composed herself and continued. “Once we were alone, she came clean on a lot of stuff. She told me she had been planning to rob Armando, but since she was basically being held prisoner, she didn’t know if that was still going on or not. She’d had her phone taken away from her, so there was no way she could get information out to anyone. Robbing Armando was her ticket out. She’d met a guy, somehow, that was going to take her to South America and keep her safe. She said she took the job with Armando to try and get away from her family. The plan to rob Armando was to try and get away from him.”

“Do you know who this other guy is?” I asked.

“No, she said his name was Martin, but that’s all she said about him,” Ms. Jackson said. We all looked at each other, mosely shocked at this revelation.

“What’s her plan now? Did she tell you?” Ivan asked. He was a mixture of amused and angry. It was quite the sight to behold.

“She’s somewhat terrified that her entire plan is going to fall through. She’s got no way to contact anyone. She asked to borrow my phone, but I didn’t bring it to the bedroom with me. You know, young people are practically attached to those things. Half the time, I forget where I left it,” she said, flippantly. “She just said the next time she comes I’m supposed to leave my phone in the bathroom for her so she can use it before she leaves.”

“We’ll give you a phone for her to use. Don’t let her use your phone,” Viktor said.

“I don’t know what she thinks she’s going to plan. She’s got no way to get out of this building without someone openly declaring war on you. I don’t know who this other guy is, but he’s gotta be a complete mo ron if he thinks that’s a good idea,” Ms. Jackson said.

“We’ll take care of it, Ms. Jackson. Thank you for coming to us with this,” Adrik said. I could feel that he was also a good mixture of angry and amused

as well.

Ms. Jackson looked at Adrik seriously. “I didn’t do it for you. I did it for her. If they come after you, they come after her and she’s had enough of that

in her life.”

I looked at Adrik, slightly worried her words would make his anger take over, but he smiled at her. “I could not agree more, Ms. Jackson.”

Ms. Jackson stayed in the penthouse a little while longer while Viktor and Ivan got a cell phone set up for Giana to use. It would work like a normal cell phone, but it would also send all the information of who she was talking to, along with a copy of her texts to Viktor so he could see what she was planning. We also wanted to make sure it was the same Martin before we brought Trino in on this newest bit of information.

“When is she planning on coming back to see you?” I asked Ms. Jackson.

“She said she’d be back tomorrow. They only allow her to come once or twice a week right now,” she said.

Viktor handed her the cell phone for Giana. “Let her use this one when she’s there,” he said.

“Hide your cell phone when she’s around so she doesn’t happen upon it. You also want to keep your phone away from this one, as it’ll copy your cell phone information and send it to us,” Ivan said, trying not to laugh at the thought.

“I might need to borrow that phone and leave it with Edith the next time I see her. I know she’s talking shi t about me in between Bingo nights,” she said, laughing.

“Let us know when you want to give her something to actually talk shi t about,” Ivan said, smiling sweetly at her.

Once we were back at the house, we discussed this latest development while I made dinner. “Martin thinking he’s saving Giana from Armando would explain why he was du mb enough to go to the Mexicans, Stephen said.

“Agreed. I do wonder what she’s told him, if it’s the same Martin. I don’t know how else she would’ve met anyone from South America, who’s also willing to steal from a mafia boss, and thinks he can protect her from the same mafia boss he’s willing to steal from,” Ivan said.

“It has to be Trino’s Martin,” I said. “They had to have started this while we were at Trino’s island house. That’s the only explanation. He’s never been up here and Armando hasn’t gone to Colombia. It had to be there that either he caught her eye or she caught his.”

“I would not have expected this from Martin. Trino has always spoken highly of him,” Adrik said.

“Boobies,” I said. They all looked to me for more clarification, which made me laugh. “Boobies make men do du mb shi t all the time.”

Stephen cleared his throat. “Some men.”

“Valid point, Yoden the Enabler. Boobies make some men do du mb shi t all the time,” I said, laughing.

“But still. Like Ivan said, this still doesn’t quite make sense. Giana is a pretty woman, don’t get me wrong, but this dude is literally willing to risk his life for a woman he’s probably never slept with and likely hasn’t even made it to first base with?” Andrei said.

I cleared my throat this time. “You mean how you’ve all risked your lives for me at one point?”

“You’re different, spider monkey,” Andrei said.

I fail to see how.”

“You don’t su ck,” Misha said, seriously, which made me laugh.

“Okay, point well made. But Martin likely doesn’t think Giana su cks either. Or he’s hoping she does often. It could go either way,” I said, laughing at my own di rty joke, which caused them all to laugh heartily.

“I rest my case,” Misha said, sliding his arm around my shoulders. He kissed the top of my head, whispering, “you’re my favorite, gazelle.”

“Even bigger than the question of how often and how well Giana su cks anything is whether Martin will attempt to rescue her from the building.” Stephen said. He was normally so serious and so straight-faced when he said anything, but he was still having a hard time keeping the smile from his face.

“He has to be planning on splitting from Trino. Do you guys really think Trino would think him trying to get with a boss’s girlfriend was a good idea?” I asked. “And there’s no way Trino would support him moving against Adrik in any way, which is what it would be should he attempt to get her from this building.”

“I don’t think Trino knows.” Andret said. “Don’t you think we would’ve picked up on it while he was here if he knew something? When he was thinking about Martin, I only got something about the Mexicans. Nothing else. Surely, him trying to be Giana’s knight in shining armor would’ve come up. Even if he was trying to hide it, like he was trying to hide the fight between him and Martin.”

“Valid point, Bubba. I only caught tension because of the Mexicans too. It’s likely he doesn’t know,” I said.

“We’ll know tomorrow for sure when she uses that phone,” Viktor said.

“What’s the plan going to be if it is Trino’s Martin?” I asked Adrik.

He took a deep breath. “I’m not sure. I’ll tell him, obviously, but I also might let it play out a little more to see what their plans are before I tell him. I don’t think she’s smart enough to be able to get out of the building on her own. He would have to come for her. If that happens, he’s dead,” he said.

“She clearly doesn’t really care about him either. She’s a serial user,” I said. “I should hook her up with Max.”

The guys enjoyed another round of laughter. “We’re so glad you’re back to normal, princess,” Ivan said, still laughing.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 337

Chapter Three Hundred Thirty-Seven

Sephie

We were all somewhat inpatient to get news from the cell phone Viktor gave to Ms. Jackson the next day Finally, Viktor started to get info in the afternoon. He checked the number that she called. “It’s Trino’s Martin,” he said “She called him. They talked for two minutes.”

“I’m impressed the memorized his number, not gonna lie. Did not expect that amount of brain capacity from her,” I said.

Adrik exhaled loudly. “Trine is not going to be happy about this,” he said.

Misha’s phone beeped. He checked the message, laughing as he read it. “Oh, mir lives are about to get so entertaining. Ms. Jackson said Giana stole the phone. She thanked us for giving her an extra one.”

“Isn’t that bad, though? Like won’t she figure out it’s not Ms. Jackson’s phone now that she has it?” I asked.

“Clearly you need to reduce your brain capacity expectations once more,” Ivan said.

“Fair. Totally fair.” I said, laughing.

“She’s texting him now,” Viktor said. “They’re talking about the plan to rob Anando, it looks like. He said the plan can still go on and will be even easier now that we have Armando. So far, no mention of getting her from the building.” His phone beeped again. He looked at the message, but got up and handed me the phone. “She’s texting him in Italian now.”

I looked at the text, confused as to why she would be texting him in Italian. As I read through the text, I could feel my cheeks flush. “Oh. My. I know why Martin is willing to risk his life for this crazy bitch now. She’s got s*xting down to a f**king art. Jesus, if nothing else works out for her, she can get a job as a phone s*x operator.” I read through the rest of the text. “Wow. She really puts it all out there. In graphic detail,”

“Gross,” Misha said. “Although I would want to know what she was saying if it were anybody but Giana. Damn this hatred I have for her!”

“He might be in love with her,” I said as he responded to her very graphic text. “Oh. Oh! Something happened at the island house. He says he thinks about that night constantly.”

“When could anything happen? We were there for only one night and we all saw her with Armando at the club,” Andrei asked.

“You guys left before Armando got drunk off his a ss though,” Stephen said. “Maybe he passed out when they got back to the house, which gave her the chance to sneak off with Martin.”

“He told us that she was the one that got drunk off her a ss,” I said, somewhat surprised.

“She might’ve been, but she holds her liquor better than he does from what I saw. She had to help him out of the club,” Stephen said.

“Did you see her leave with him?” Viktor asked.

“They left the club together. What happened outside the club, I don’t know. She might’ve sent him back to the house and she left with Martin. I didn’t follow them outside to see,” Stephen said.

I felt myself getting angry at all the lies that Armando had told us. This one didn’t even matter in the grand scheme of things, but I still felt myself getting angry at just how easy it had been for him to make up a complete alternate reality in front of us. Adrik’s warm hand slipped underneath my shirt, his thumb rubbing my bare skin lightly. He pressed his cheek gently to my neck, kissing my neck lightly. “I know, solnishko. It makes me angry too,” he said quietly.

I leaned back against him, taking a deep breath. I grabbed his arms and pulled them around my waist. “You’re getting so much better at that,” I said, kissing his cheek.

Viktor’s phone beeped once more. I looked at it, reading the latest message. “Aww, that’s all for tonight, gentlemen. She says the only charger she can find won’t work on this phone so she’s going to turn it off until she can lift a charger from Ms. Jackson. Rude,” I said.

“You called it, princess. Serial user, Ivan said, laughing.

Viktor sighed. “So, let’s assume that they’re going to steal the artwork from Armando’s house, since that’s really all they can get to. I’m sure there’s more stuff of value there, but the artwork is the main thing. Artwork is really hard to move as far as stolen items go. They’re not going to finance much with that loot.”

“What are Martin’s finances like? I know Trino’s wealthy and has legitimate businesses, but what about Martin?” I asked.

“From what I know, Martin is doing fine financially. He’s not quite the businessman that Trino is, but he has his own investments that allow him to live quite comfortably, plus whatever Trino pays him.” Adrik said.

“This still doesn’t make complete sense to my brain. Why would he risk so much for her? Can one woman be that good in bed? Legitimate question, by the way. I really want to know,” I said.

Adrik laughed, holding me tighter. “I’m not the one you should be asking that question to, my love. I would risk everything for you.”

“You guys don’t count,” Ivan said.

“It’s not about Giana, I don’t think. I think she’s an excuse,” Stephen said.

“What do you mean?” I asked. I could always count on Stephen to fill in the psychological gaps for me.

“Martin likely hasn’t been happy with Trino, for whatever reason, for some time. It’s only just now coming to a head. He’s using Giana as the excuse he needs to finally make a move. It just so happens that he can feel like the wh ite knight coming to her rescue if he risks everything to get her safely away from Armando. That cancels out whatever guilt he feels for leaving Trino for whatever trivial reason he has,” he said.

“The user is getting used. That’s somewhat satisfying,” I said.

“Are you going to wait to tell Trino?” Ivan asked Adrik.

“Let’s give them more time to see what they give us. You know what kind of temper Trino has. He might not be able to sit on this one if we tell him too early. With his guys’ loyalty already in question, it puts him in a dangerous position,” Adrik said.

“Shi t. I didn’t think about that,” I said. “His guys might side with Martin and help him overthrow Trino. Giana definitely isn’t as weird as me, although it could be argued that she’s definitely put some kind of spell on Martin. Sh it, shi t, shi t.”

“Boobies, am I right?” Stephen said, completely straight-faced. Everyone erupted into laughter..

It was two more days before Viktor got more information from Giana’s stolen fake phone. Viktor had one of the guards that was watching her leave a charger for the phone in the hallway like someone had dropped it outside Ms. Jackson’s apartment. Of course, she picked it up.

Adrik and I were in his office when all the guys came in, clearly amused. “Is she back?” I asked, excitedly.

“She’s back,” Misha said, grinning at me. I clapped my hands, waiting to hear what had been said.

“I think we all need to get out more,” I said, shaking my head.

“It looks like they’re finalizing the plans for Armando’s house. Martin said he has a few guys that can do it,” Viktor said.

“Does he give names, by chance?” Adrik asked. “Trino’s dealers are very loyal to him. I would like to know if any of them are doing this for Martin without Trino knowing.”

“No names,” Viktor said. “But they’re planning on making it happen this weekend. We can have guys watch Armando’s house to see who it is.”

Adrik nodded. “Make that happen. If they’re Trino’s guys too, he needs to know. Maybe Martin has his own guys here, but if that’s the case, I want to know. He doesn’t get to have guys in my city,” he said. I was across the room from him, but I felt his anger loud and clear. I knew my eyes were dark. It seemed like any level of anger would make them go dark now. I went to Adrik, even though I was enjoying feeling his anger. I didn’t necessarily

want it to stop this time. Trino was the only one staying loyal through all this, so a betrayal of him felt like a betrayal of us. Adrik pushed his chair back from his desk, opening his arms for me.

“Do we let this robbery happen?” Ivan asked.

“I don’t necessarily care if they steal from Armando. Serves him right. But I want to know if Martin is bold enough to think he can operate in my city without my knowledge. If that’s the case, I won’t need to tell Trino anything until after I’ve ki lled Martin,” Adrik said.

“Giana is asking about Martin getting her out of the building.” Viktor said. “He didn’t know she was being held there, under guard, apparently. He says he thought she was at Armando’s house.”

There was silence for a few minutes, then Viktor’s phone beeped. He looked at the message, but stood up to hand me the phone.

“Is now really the time to be s*xting?” I asked as I took the phone from him. I looked at the message and immediately started laughing. “She’s cussing him out. She must type faster in Italian than in English.” I kept reading, laughing more as I went. “She’s calling him a do nkey, which is hilarious.”

“Why would she call him a do nkey?” Misha asked.

“For Italians, it’s an insult. It’s the same as telling someone they’re st upid. She also tells him to go get f**ked, basically,” I said, still laughing. Martin began to reply, apologizing for not knowing. “He says he couldn’t have known. She hasn’t contacted him in weeks. He didn’t know they were living there. He assumed she would be at Armando’s house.”

“I have to side with Martin on this one. I would’ve assumed the same thing.” Misha said.

wwww

“Right? It seems like the logical assumption here,” I said as we waited for Giana’s response. “She’s asking him again how he plans to get her out.

Chapter Three Hundred Thirty-Eight

Sephie

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“For Italians, it’s an insult. It’s the same as telling someone they’re st upid. She also tells him to go get f**ked, basically,” I said, still laughing. Martin began to reply, apologizing for not knowing. “He says he couldn’t have known. She hasn’t contacted him in weeks. He didn’t know they were living

there. He assumed she would be at Armando’s house.”

“I have to side with Martin on this one. I would’ve assumed the same thing,” Misha said.

“Right? It seems like the logical assumption here,” I said as we waited for Giana’s response. “She’s asking him again how he plans to get her out.”

“This could go very badly for Martin,” Andrei said.

“He says he needs time to come up with a plan to get her out of the building. He’s asking her if there’s any way she can ditch her guards and he says trying to send a team into the building is going to be next to impossible,” I said.

“Well, at least we know he’s not a complete mo ron,” Viktor said.

I laughed at Giana’s response. “She’s still mad. She’s cussing him more and wants to know how long he needs. She said she’s starting to regret

sleeping with him that night, so now we know the answer to that question.”

“Plot twist, she popped Martin’s cherry and that’s why he’s completely in love with her,” Ivan said, causing a round of laughter from everyone.

“You’re not wrong, Squish,” I said. “It would explain quite a lot. I’m starting to question whether you guys have been telling me the truth about my extra spicy side though. Seeing it in Giana doesn’t seem very fun.”

“Not even in the same ballpark, gazelle,” Misha said.

Adrik held me tighter, saying quietly, “never compare yourself to anyone ever again. There’s no comparison.”

Before I could react to his words, Martin replied to Giana. “He says he needs a day or two to scope out the building and see what his options are. He said his guys can watch the building and find out if there’s any way in.”

“So, Ivan was right. This guy is pu ssy whipped. Clearly he’s not had enough of it,” Andrei said.

“She says she can’t wait much longer. She’s going to try to escape with or without him,” I said. “She’s acting like she’s in a dungeon. I mean, granted, she’s being held against her will, but she’s got everything she needs for f**k’s sake. Nobody’s chaining her to the f**king floor while they beat one of the people who mean the most to her in this world in the next room. While she hears everything.” My anger came on so suddenly and so strongly that it almost surprised me, but it was also mixed with fear. I wouldn’t let myself feel the fear when everything was happening. I knew I had to keep my wits about me, so I pushed all the fear down, but it was still there. Waiting to be acknowledged. It all came flooding back to me, overwhelming my anger. I immediately started to shake, even worse than I had days before when I was scared of being apart from Adrik.

He felt it right away, whispering to me to try to keep me calm. He took the phone from my hand and threw it on his desk. “Close your eyes, love. Listen to my voice. You’re safe. You’re with me. Nobody can hurt you here,” he said. He just repeated those words until he felt me take a breath and my body relax slightly. He turned me around in his lap so he could stand up with me in his arms. He walked us both to the couch, keeping me in his Jap. He kept repeating that I was safe and I was with him and that nobody could hurt me now. His hand ran up and down my back lightly, trying to calm the shaking.

I took a deep breath, lifting my head from his shoulder to look at him. I could tell from the look on his face that my eyes had changed. I shu t my eyes again and rested my head on his shoulder again. Viktor’s phone beeped a few times. I heard one of the guys get up to get it. I felt Adrik shake his head, telling them to wait. We sat in silence for a few more minutes. I took another deep breath, looking at Adrik once more to see if my eyes had returned to normal yet. He smiled sweetly at me, nodding his head once. He reached up and put his palm against my cheek, his thumb rubbing gently back and forth.

I sighed once more, turning to look at the concerned faces looking back at me. I started to apologize, but Ivan cut me off. “That is never something you should apologize for, princess. You never let yourself feel the fear while everything was happening, but it doesn’t mean it went away,” he said.

“It’s important that you admit to yourself you were scared in that situation, Seph. We all were,” Stephen said.

“You were?” I asked, moving so I was sitting in between Adrik’s legs and leaning back against him so I could see everyone again. I pulled his arms around me, resting mine on top of his.

“Of course we were. How could we not be?” Andrei asked.

“Well, now that you ask it like that, I don’t know,” I said.

“Just because we’ve been in similar situations before doesn’t mean we weren’t all scared this was the first time we weren’t going to get to you in time,” Misha said.

“Having to be careful and patient when it came to looking for you was one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do,” Viktor said.

“We were all worried we would be able to get you both back,” Adrik said.

I smiled at them. “I was sure you guys would find us. I was scared that I wouldn’t be able to hang on long enough for you to find us. Armando doesn’t know how to punch very well, but he’s strong and I was completely defenseless,” I said quietly, looking at the floor.

“You were worried about the one thing I was sure of,” Stephen said. “Once we found you, I knew you’d be able to hold on long enough for us to get

you out. I’ve never met anyone as strong as you, Seph. I was more worried they would get rid of Ivan. Armando beating you was completely unexpected for me. I knew they needed you. I didn’t expect him to lose it.”

“I might’ve provoked that,” I said. “I’m mostly accountable for that.”

Adrik clicked his tongue, turning me so I would look at him again. “You bear none of the responsibility of that. I don’t care how angry he was about anything. He had no right to touch you,” he said. He was angry when he said it. I knew on some level he wasn’t angry with me, but it still surprised me enough that I felt a twinge of fear return and I tensed. He felt it, pulling me toward him. He whispered, “I’m sorry, Sephie. Keep your eyes closed again. I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

Viktor’s phone beeped again. Without raising my head or opening my eyes, I asked what was being said. “Martin is assuring her that he’s going to get her out, one way or another. He’s begging her not to try to escape on her own,” Viktor said.

“I can’t handle the back and forth between semi-smart Martin and du mb as f**k Martin. I’m getting whiplash,” I said. I felt Adrik laugh as he put his hand on my neck, pulling me up so I would look at him. He smiled, saying quietly so only I could hear, “green does mean sarcasm, it appears.” He pulled me to him, kissing me gently. He left his hand on my neck as I rested my head on his shoulder, my face buried in his neck once more.

Chapter Three Hundred Thirty-Nine

Sephie

“She’s giving him a few days to get a plan together, but she said she’s tired of waiting. She says she can’t stay here any longer,” Viktor said.

“Jesus, she’s dramatic,” I said. “I mean, it’s not her fault, but seriously. Shut the f**k up already.”

They all laughed. “I’ll have the guys at the building try to find out whe’s watching the building. I’ll also put a few guys on Armando’s house. He only has a few guys there normally. They might’ve given up since we’ve had him.”

“I want to know who’s working for Martin. It does not make me happy if he has guys in my city,” Adrik said. “I want to wait to see if Martin is dumb enough to make a move against my building before telling Trino about all this.” He pulled me up so he could look at me again. “Do you think you can find the answer to that? Can Misha see if he’s planning on trying to use force to get Giana out?”

I thought for a second before answering. “I need to be around him or hear him to get something from him,” I said. I glanced at Misha. “Do you think we can find him and see what his plans are? We can use Bubba too. Maybe we’ll get sound again.”

“It’s worth a try,” he said.

“I think we need to give it a day or two, though. I’m not sure we’ll get anything useful right now, because he doesn’t know what the hell to do yet,” I said. “And also, I’m scared of seeing him thinking about her graphic text from earlier. I don’t need that seared into my brain.”

“Ewww, gross! Why would you even think about that, gazelle? Now I’m going to be paranoid to try to find him,” Misha said, acting like he was going to vomit.

“You, Are. Welcome. My adorable Russian guardian,” I said, laughing.

“I hate you,” Misha said, trying not to laugh.

We waited three more days for Martin to come up with a plan for getting Giana out. She went silent on him while she waited for him to figure out how to be her savior. We had moved back to the penthouse, as Adrik had several meetings for a few days straight. We’d been able to spend almost the entire week at the house, which felt a little bit like Heaven for all of us.

The messages from Martin came in while Adrik was in a meeting and Viktor was in his normal master of the schedule duties. The rest of us were oblivious until that evening when they came upstairs after Adrik’s day was finished. I was working on dinner, with help from Misha and Andrei when everyone else walked in.

I put everything I had in my hands down, walking to Adrik. His wide smile stretched across his face as soon as he saw me walking toward him. He opened his arms, hugging me tightly to him. He lifted me off the floor, holding me against him as I giggled. I could feel the stress melt away the longer he held me.

Ever since I’d told him about my fear of being away from him, as well as finally admitting that I was terrified when Ivan and I were kidnapped, he’d been even more affectionate with me, if that was even possible. It was like another intimacy level was unlocked for us. We both felt like we were even more in sync with each other.

My eyes continued to change, depending on my mood. So far, I’d been able to hide it from the guys, but it was starting to happen so frequently that I was getting worried I wouldn’t be able to keep it from them for much longer. Although, I had to admit that I loved having a secret that only Adrik and I shared. I loved every single one of the guys, but I was enjoying the extra intimacy that Adrik and I had lately. The secret of my ever-changing eyes. was something for him alone. For now.

Once Adrik put me down, I turned to see Ivan’s devious grin. “She’s back?” I asked..

“She’s back,” he said.

“Come on, Papa Bear. Out with it,” I said, pulling Adrik back to the kitchen with me so I could finish dinner while listening to the latest development.

“Martin finally got back to her. She’s been completely silent. He’s sent a few texts to her, checking on her, but she hasn’t responded to any of them,” Viktor said.

“Rude, but not unexpected from her,” I said.

“She’s got serious Tori vibes sometimes,” Misha said.

Andrei laughed. “That’s why you hate her so much. You also hated Tori,” he said.

Misha looked at Andrei like he’d never put that together before this moment. “How did I not figure that out before now?” Misha said.

“Martin said he’s come up with a plan to get her out, but it’s going to take time. He says, and I quote, ‘the security at the building is next level.’” Viktor said, proudly. “He said he’s planning on creating a diversion so he can get her out without too many people seeing it.”

“Please tell me he’s going to walk in the lobby and yell “fire,” I said.

“He does not specify, but that’s really his only viable option,” Ivan said.

“What about Armando’s house? Did that happen?” I asked, setting the food out for them.

“Sephie, this smells amazing, for the record,” Viktor said.

“New recipe. Tell me if you want it to be in regular rotation,” I said, grinning at him.

They did clean out Armando’s house over the weekend. Our guys got pics of the guys that did the job, but nobody knows them,” Ivan said.

“Uh oh. That doesn’t bode well for our dear recently deflowered Martin,” I said.

Stephen choked on his food as he was laughing. “Warning next time, Seph. Not while I’m chewing,” he said, still laughing as he took a drink of water trying to stop coughing and laughing at the same time.

“No jokes at the table, children,” I said, sternly, causing more laughter. “How much did they take from Armando?” I asked after everyone had calmed downl

“Everything but the safes. They legit brought in trucks and cleaned everything out. Furniture, everything. It looked like a moving company was there,”

Ivan said.

“I’m surprised they left the safes. I would’ve thought they would have moved those, thinking they’d be able to break into them later,” Stephen said.

“Same. I had our guys move the safes here. I’m not above cutting his finger off and popping an eyeball out to get it open,” Ivan said.

I coughed this time. “We don’t use that kind of language at dinner, Squish,” I said, pretending like I was going to vomit. He looked at me, only somewhat apologetic.

“I support this line of thinking.” Stephen said.

“Of course the inventor of enabling would agree with that,” I said. Stephen simply grinned at me. Completely unapologetic for his support of such behavior.

“What about Trino?” Misha asked.

“It’s looking more like I’m going to tell Trino after I kill Martin, given he’s got guys here without my permission. I am curious to see what his plan for getting Giana out of the building is, though. I had planned to let her go after I’m done with Armando. She’s fairly insignificant and I don’t care that she cleaned out his house. But now, she might not survive this either,” Adrik said.

I suddenly had a thought come into mind. “I don’t disagree about killing either one of them, but I think telling Trino before you do anything to Martin ill be better than waiting until after. Out of respect, sure, whatever, but I think it has to do more with his guys’ wavering loyalty. Martin disappearing

Is going to cause a riff with them. Trino needs to have new guys in place before it happens or he’s going to be in danger,” I said.

Adrik nodded, looking to Misha for confirmation. Misha had his faraway look for a moment, then came back to the present moment. “I agree with Sephie. He needs notice about Martin. It doesn’t seem like he’s going to disagree with you. I think they’re still arguing, but his guys are a problem.”

“Totally accountable for that one,” I said quietly, taking a sip of water.

Ivan heard me, laughing. “I think your demons have been hanging out with my demons a little too much, princess. You just showed them for who they really are. You were right when you said if you saving Martin was enough to cause them to question their loyalty, they were never loyal in the first place. Trino needed to know that. It’s going to save him in the end.”

“I still question the sanity of anyone who’s completely fine with chopping people’s heads off but me knowing the future is out of line. Makes no sense,” I said,

“It does, though. People fear what they can’t explain. They can’t fathom you being any different from them and they don’t have anything special about them, so that means you can’t either. At least in their minds,” Stephen said.

“This is why they burned so many villages to get to you, isn’t it?” I asked.

“50/50. Half were insurance scams, the other half were attempts on me,” Stephen said.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 340

Chapter Three Hundred Forty

Sephie

After dinner, while everyone else worked on cleaning up the kitchen for me, I pulled Misha and Andrei to the side. “So, I’m really not sure how we got sound last time, but I want to see if we can get sound again this time. Although if he’s speaking Spanish the whole time, it’ll be useless anyway. But let’s give it a go and see what we can find out about the du mbest Colombian to walk the earth,” I said. They both laughed at me, each one taking one of my hands. “I have both hands available this time. Maybe it’ll be an extra power boost.”

It was different this time. I could clearly see Andrei’s thoughts while Misha worked on finding Martin. I wanted to ask if he could see mine, but I didn’t want to interrupt Misha. It took a few moments for Misha to find Martin, but once he did, we could clearly see him and hear him, like he was standing in front of us.

This time, instead of it being a movie playing in front of us, we were in the movie. It was like we were standing in the room with Martin, only he couldn’t see us. He was talking on the phone, in Italian, which was incredibly surprising but ended the call before I could tell who he was speaking to. He dialed another number, waiting for the person to pick up. I vaguely heard Viktor’s phone beep in the background, so I knew he must’ve been calling Giana before I heard her voice answer his call.

They talked briefly, but he told her his plan for trying to get her out. In English, thankfully. She started crying. She was switching between Italian and English while she told him how happy she was and how she couldn’t wait to see him. She started to tell him all the di rty things she was going to do to him once he got her out. Of course, she said that part in Italian so I was the only one made to suffer through that part of the conversation. I must’ve made a face or said how gross it was to have to listen to out loud, because I could hear the guys laughing quietly behind me.

After their conversation, the fast forward button was pushed and we saw Martin making another phone call. He was in a different location than before, but I still didn’t recognize it. I fully expected him to speak Spanish when the person on the other end of the line answered, but I was wrong. He had a Conversation in Italian, but I understood everything. Then, we all heard it. He said Sal’s name. Both guys squeezed my hands when he addressed Sal by name. “Shi t,” we all said at the same time. The vision ended shortly after, leaving the three of us in stunned silence,

I felt Adrik walk up behind me, touching my shoulder gently. I think he could feel my emotions going completely off the rails as my mind raced through possibilities. “Sephie?” he said quietly. I instantly knew he was worried about my eyes giving everyone a show. I let go of Misha and Andrei’s hands and turned to look at Adrik, immediately seeing the look on his face that meant my eyes were doing their own thing. I groaned, then put my head on his shoulder, hiding my face from everyone else while I tried to get a handle on my emotions. I felt Adrik’s arms around me, holding me firmly against him. “It’s okay, solnishko. We can show them. I don’t think you’re going to be able to hide it forever,” he whispered to me.

I took a deep breath, trying to get a handle on everything and just concentrate on my anger. They already knew about my demon eyes, so I could show them that. I just needed to let my anger overtake everything else and it would be okay. When I looked at Adrik, he smirked at me. “Demon eyes for added emphasis,” he said, still barely above a whisper.

“I can do this,” I said quiet enough that only he could hear me. I felt the pull in my chest from him as he leaned down and kissed my forehead.

I turned to look at everyone else. “Holy shi t, spider monkey, they’re black now.”

“It’s her warning system,” Adrik said, laughing.

“No shi t,” Misha said. “What were they saying, gazelle?”

“Wait, she can understand Spanish now?” Stephen asked, completely confused. “That’s impressive for a mere human brain.”

Andrei laughed. “Martin apparently knows Italian. I assumed he was using a translator for her texts, but he was speaking Italian almost the whole time we saw him.”

“Unexpected from the du mbest Colombian to ever walk the earth,” Ivan said.

“He’s still vacillating between semi-smart and du mb as f**k. His plan for Giana is actually pretty solid. I did not expect such strategy from him,” 1

said.

Ivan was thinking over what I’d just said, running his hand over his goatee the whole time. He looked at me and I could see him figure out his plan. I grinned at him, knowing he’d nailed it. “He’s going to have Giana fake an illness to get her out of the building He can get to her away from the

building,” he said.

“Winner winner chicken dinner,” I said “She’s supposed to take being in so much pain that they have to take her to the ER. He’s either going to grab her en route or at the hospital.”

“What about his last conversation” Misha asked.

I looked at Misha, somewhat amused that he didn’t want to be the one to say it. “Co ward,” I said. His wide smile stretched across his face and he eagerly agreed with me.

“Who was he talking to Viktor asked.

“Sal,” Andrei and 1 said at the same time.

“WHAT!” Adrik asked, his level of anger now completely overtaking mine, but also feeding into mine. I was secretly happy I wouldn’t need to worry about my eves for the foreseeable future. I turned to him, putting my hands on his chest, helping to keep him calm.

“Thi

actually quite helpful, if you think about it. It was the missing piece. Everything is now connected nicely,” I said, smiling up at him and loving the fire that was building in both of us. We were about to unleash chaps,

Chapter Three Hundred Forty-One

Adrik

When Andrei and Sephie both said that Martin had been speaking to Sal on the phone, my anger hit levels I'd never experienced before. It was so sudden that it almost surprised me. Sephie felt it, of course, immediately putting her hands on my chest, which quieted the rage building inside me enough that I could at least think.

This meant that every single person, save Trino, had betrayed me. While J trusted Trino, at this point, it would not surprise me if he betrayed me as well. It appeared that we could trust no one. My mind was racing, trying to connect all the pieces to this ever-growing puzzle.

"…Everything is now connected nicely," Sephie said. I knew her mind could connect pieces sometimes faster than mine could. She was also able to keep her wits about her when she was angry, where that was something I still struggled with. My anger overtook everything, but I could feel her helping me with it. I could feel her cool, calming presence keeping my fire from becoming an inferno. But just barely. I knew she was also enjoying feeling my anger, as it was feeding hers. She still had plenty of unresolved emotions from being taken, so the fact that Sal was now once again front and center in this little drama made her look forward to watching his demise just as much as I was.

She was rarely scared by my anger. Only once or twice had it caught her off-guard. She knew it was never directed at her, so she was usually able to handle it without being intimidated by it. But it was surprising to feel just how much she enjoyed feeling it sometimes. She almost craved it in certain situations. When we got to her in that room with Armando, I knew she was in pain. There was no mistaking she was in pain, given how terrible she looked. She was a bloody bruised mess. I couldn't feel her pain yet, but I could feel her relief that I was there, followed closely by her hunger for my anger. She knew I was ready to kill Armando, but I could clearly feel that she craved it just as much as I did in that moment.

Sephie was so pure and so innocent that it was almost unexpected from her. I didn't think much of it at the time, because I didn't think much about anything except ending Armando at the time. But looking back, I was surprised to feel just how much she enjoyed seeing my bloodlust completely out of control. How much she wanted it unleashed.

I'd spent so much time worrying that she would look at me differently once she saw that side of me. I was so worried that she would be scared by it and would leave me that I'd spent so much energy trying to control that side of me. When I walked to her to put my jacket around her, she looked at me with every ounce of love she possessed in her body and soul. I knew, without a doubt, that had she not been in excruciating pain, I would've been able to feel her warmth spread to me as she watched me walk to her. She saw my demon on full display in that moment and she loved him with everything she had. What's more, she was able to control it with just a touch.

I knew she was almost tired of hearing me tell her how amazing she is, but it's the truth. Just when I think I can't love her any more than I already do, she finds a new way to make my heart grow larger for her. Stephen had told me after we got her back that he was thinking about her when setting up to provide cover to all of us when we were at the brawn warehouse. He said, "if ever there was unconditional love, Sephie was it." He was right. She loved all of us, no matter what. But she loved me with her entire soul. She had lifetimes of love built up. It was the only explanation for how she could still see so much good in the world given all the evil she'd witnessed firsthand. She was love.

"What were they talking about?" Viktor asked, snapping me back to the present moment.

"I could only hear Martin's side of the conversation. He spoke to Giana on speaker phone, but he was in a different location when he talked to Sal. The fast forward button got hit, so I don't think this conversation has actually taken place yet," Sephie said. She paused. I could feel her trying to get control of her emotions once more. I could feel the fear from a few days ago returning.

It never seemed to matter what level my anger was at, as soon as I felt her losing any bit of control of her emotions, my anger disappeared and there was only her. The pull in my chest was so strong that I couldn't ignore it. I pulled her tight against me, turning her to face me. "Talk to me, solnishko. What are you feeling?" I asked, my lips next to her ear. She looked up at me. Her eyes were changing again as I watched, going from the almost black that meant she was angry to the light blue, almost white that meant she was afraid. She held my gaze as she said, "Sal is using Giana as payment to Martin for help in overthrowing Trino. Martin wants in on the human trafficking side of Sal's business, as well."

I heard everyone cursing, but I couldn't take my eyes off Sephie. I could feel her fear, but it wasn't at the level when her eyes had first changed to a completely new color. It seemed like she could make them dark at will now, which likely meant she would be able to figure out how to turn them white at will soon. I caught myself thinking about how impressed I constantly found myself with her. She was always so hard on herself and constantly joked about how out of control her emotions are, but I could feel exactly what she felt now. She wasn't out of control at all. She just feels everything at a magnified level from everyone else. She was always in complete control of the turbulent ocean inside her.

She clicked her tongue at me. "I know what you're thinking, but it looks like you're smiling at the thought of Giana being passed around like the prize at Bingo." I couldn't help the laugh that escaped at being caught. I glanced at the guys, who were admittedly confused. Sephie didn't take her eyes off me, she just said, "totally accountable for that," as she raised her hand. I watched as her eyes changed from the almost white to all green.

"Does Giana know she's basically just a trophy to her godfather?" Stephen asked.

Sephie sighed. Her eyes were slowly returning to their normal color as she tried to calm down. I could feel her trying to push her anger to the surface, knowing she would be able to keep her eyes dark that way. "I don't get the impression that she does, but I need to talk to her to be able to answer that more definitively," she said. She still hadn't taken her eyes off mine I think she was waiting for me to give her the all-clear that she could look at the guys again. I had to admit that I was enjoying her looking at me and wasn't planning on giving her the okay anytime soon. Have to say I'm thankful that my eyes don't change colors when I'm being a shit.

"Now I wonder if she's using Martin or if she really has some kind of feelings for him," Andrei said.

"I have no love for her, but it doesn't seem fair that she's passed around like that. Even for her," Misha said. "I get the feeling that she was placed with Armando. I don't think it was as much her choice as she led us to believe. Now she's being placed with Martin."

"But now it begs the question of do we tell her we know and see how much she knows. What the f**k do we do with her now?" Ivan said, clearly getting frustrated.

"And not that it needs to be said out loud, but it needs to be said out loud. How disgusting is Sal to be passing his goddaughter around like she's not a human being?" Stephen said. "It makes me want to punch Armando for using her like he did. Giana is obnoxious, but nobody deserves to be treated like that."

"At least we know where she is right now. I'm a little more worried about Trino, Martin is clearly moving against him. Trino either needs to get out of there or he needs to get nd of everyone around him and he needs to do it today," Sephie said. She saw the smirk on my face that usually accompanied her demon eyes. I couldn't help myself when her eyes went dark. I didn't understand why they turned me on so much, but I had a hard time controlling myself anytime I saw her demon eyes. I just wanted to f**k her. She stood on her toes and kissed me passionately, but quickly, catching me completely off guard. "You can. Later," she said in my ear as she turned back to face the guys. She leaned her body against mine, which was appreciated until I calmed down.

"Should Trino come here? Is he safe in Colombia right now? He can't trust his guys and he definitely can't trust Martin. There's also the matter of the Mexicans that are going to get bolder. Where else can he go that he's going to be safe?" Ivan said, thinking out loud.

"Should we go get him?" Stephen asked.

◆

Chapter Three Hundred Forty-Two

Adrik

I pulled my phone out of my pocket. I still had my arms around Sephie, with my chin resting on her shoulder while I texted him, instead of calling. She craned her neck to look at me, questioning why I didn't call him. "He needs to be alone, where no one can overhear him. He'll call me from a burner phone. He knows what to do when I text him that," I said. She reached up, placing her palm against my cheek, her other arm on top of mine.

Ever since she'd told me that she was terrified of being apart from me, we'd somehow gotten even closer. I'd been addicted to her for months now, but it was to a new level now. And I could tell that she couldn't get enough of me now, too. When she said that she tended to get seriously injured when she was apart from me, it hit me like a ton of bricks, She was completely right. Both times, at the ball and when she was taken, I had sent her away in an effort to keep her safe. Both times ended horribly for her and almost cost her life. I was trying to keep her safe, thinking she would be safe when she was away from me. I felt like I had brought danger into her life and wanted to protect her from it. But it was clear to me now that I was the only thing that could protect her. She would continue to get hurt if I kept sending her away, regardless of my intention. She belonged at my side. No matter what.

I had to admit that I felt better about keeping her with me now that I knew she loved my demon as much as she did me. Part of the reason I sent her away both times was out of worry that she'd see that side of me and not be able to handle it. She inevitably saw it both times, just not for the reason I expected. Her love for me never wavered. Even from the beginning when I basically kidnapped her to try and keep her safe from Anthony. I wanted her close to me even then and I barely knew her. The stronger my love for her grew, the more worried I became that I would do something to cause her to leave. It was my fear of losing her that caused me to almost lose her. Twice. It was painfully obvious to me now that I always needed her by my side. She made it clear every single day that she was perfect for that spot.

It only took Trino a few minutes before he called me back. I put it on speaker, as the guys moved closer so they could hear easier. I still had my arms around Sephie as I answered his call. "Trino, you're not going to like this."

He sighed heavily. "Just once, Jefe. Just once I want you to make me call you like this and you give me good news. Then my life will be complete. What do you have for me? How bad is it?"

"It's worse than we thought, Trino," I said.

"Trino, can you get out of Colombia on your own? Or do we need to come get you? You can't trust anyone. That's how bad it is," Sephie said.

"Miha, are you serious?"

"It's bad, Trino. Martin is actively plotting against you with Sal. We don't know the exact details of his plan with Sal, yet. He's also made a move against me up here, as he has guys operating in the city without my permission. We do know they're not your guys, so that's your one consolation. He's been promised Giana as payment for helping Sal overthrow you. Then there's the matter of your security guys. I wouldn't trust any of them if I were you. I don't know if you have other guards you can trust, but I think it's best if you leave immediately until we can get security figured out for you. Is there somewhere safe you can get to until we can get to you? Can you get out of Colombia on your own?" I asked.

We had to wait on Trino to stop cursing before he could respond. He started to speak, then ended up cursing again. He finally regained composure and said tensely, "I have a place in the country, close to Panama. No one knows about it, so they won't know how to find me there."

"You're sure no one knows about it?" I asked.

"I bought it for my parents. Everyone thinks they're dead, but they've been quietly living out their days up there. No one knows about it. You're the first person I've told. I'll send you the information. I can get there and I'll be safe. I can make it to Panama, but any farther will be difficult without them finding me," Trino said. I could hear the worry in his voice as the gravity of the situation settled in.

"I have old friends in Panama. Get to your parents' place and they'll come for you. You'll be safe with them. You have my word, Trino."

He was silent for a moment, like he didn't know what to say. "You're sure about this, Jefe?" he asked. He was having trouble believing that everyone had turned against him as well.

"I'm sure about this. We have messages between Giana and Martin. He's planning on getting her away from the building so he can grab her. He's already had his guys take everything from Armando's house. Literally everything. He's promised Giana that he'll take her somewhere in South America to keep her safe. We thought he was just pu ssy whipped at first, but then we found out he's talking to Sal and that Giana is payment for his help in moving against you. We still don't know the plans of Sal and Ricardo, but they clearly involve you as well. Given that the Mexicans have already made one attempt on your life, I think you're safer out of Colombia. We can get you a security team that will remain loyal to you no matter what. They might have to learn Spanish, but that can be arranged." I paused, inhaling deeply. "Trino, you're the only one that's remained loyal to me through all of this. I know that's why they're moving against you now and I apologize for that, but I promise I will end this and make everything right once again."

"Jefe, no apologies needed. You're apparently the only one that's remained loyal to me, so it turns out we're in the same boat," he said. We heard him cursing again, like he was losing control of his temper as he thought about the ramifications of everything I'd just told him.

"Trino, I know you know, but I need to say this again. You cannot trust anyone you have around you right now. Martin is gleefully betraying you for some crazy a ss pus sy and your guys are looking for an excuse to turn against you. I know you're pi ssed right now and I'm pi ssed for you, but I need you to control your temper long enough that you get to safety. Once you hang up with us, I need you to get in the nearest vehicle and get the f**k out of there. Not a word to anybody. Understand?" Sephje said. Her tone was halfway between threatening and pleading. We heard him exhale once more, but he was still silent. "Trino, I'll kick your motherf**king a ss from here to next week if you don't do what I just said," Sephie said. This time, her tone was dripping with anger. I tensed, instinctively. We all knew that tone,

Trino did too, apparently. He chuckled. "Okay, okay, Miha. I promise. Dios mio, I don't think I've met anyone that has a bigger temper than I do."

"You're go ddamn right. Now stop wasting f**king time," she said, still angry.

Trino cursed in Spanish, but agreed with her. He ended the call and promptly sent the location of his parents' place. I told him to let me know when he made it there or if he got into trouble on the way.

I looked to Misha. "Is he going to make it out in time?" Sephie walked to Misha, grabbing his hand as Misha searched for Trino. Andrei walked to Sephie's side, taking her other hand in his. We saw Misha's eyes go wide, which meant he was watching Trino. He squeezed Sephie's hand. They watched for a few moments, then the movie ended and they were back to the present moment.

"And?" Ivan asked, anxiously.

"Unless he changes his mind at the last minute, he's going to make it out," Sephie said, wiping her eyes. Even Andrei and Misha looked troubled with what they'd just seen.

"He's going to make it just in time to say goodbye to his mother," Andrei said, having to turn away from us to get a handle on his own emotions.

"Apparently, she's been si ck and she wouldn't let his father contact Trino because she didn't want to worry him. She took a turn this morning. His father thought she would pull through like she'd done before, but she's not going to make it. Trino will get there in time to spend the last couple of hours with her," Misha said as tears fell down his face.

"Everything happens for a reason," Sephie said quietly, still wiping tears from her cheeks. We all stood in shocked silence for a few minutes.

"What do we do with Giana?" Viktor asked. "Do we know when she's going to fake an illness? What do I tell my guys to do? Leave her here or take her to the hospital?"

Surprisingly, it was Andrei that answered. "I think I can find out if she knows she's being used if I talk to her. If she's aware she's being passed around by Sal and she's willingly going along with the plan, that's one thing. But if she thinks that Martin is saving her when he's really claiming his prize, that's an entirely different situation. It doesn't make sense that she would throw herself at him when we were on the island. Either she knew he was the next target or she was hoping he could save her and she didn't have a better option."

Sephie studied him for a moment. "You want to try talking to her by yourself, Bubba? You're sure about that?" she asked.

◆

Chapter Three Hundred Forty-Three

Adrik

“We all hate her, but oddly enough, most of my hate for her died with Tori. I can’t explain it, but I’m pretty apathetic toward Giana since the night I killed Tori. I think I’m the only one that can objectively talk to her and find out what she knows. Everyone else is still carrying heavy anger toward her. Rightfully so, don’t get me wrong. Not judging anybody else here. I just can’t say the same now,” he said.

Sephie and I both looked at Misha, expecting to get confirmation. We could see the look of disgust on his face. “You’re not getting anything from me on her. Sorry,” he said.

Sephie laughed. “Bubba’s right. Misha’s clearly not over her yet.”

“I’m not saying she deserves to be passed around like she has been, but she still deserves most of what she gets,” Misha said.

“I rest my case,” Andrei said, crossing his arms across his chest. I looked at my watch. It was still early enough that he could go talk to her. I looked at him and Viktor. “Go. See what you can find out,” I said. They both nodded once, leaving the penthouse.

“Before they get back, who’s got her knowing what’s been happening all along? Show of hands,” Stephen said, raising his hand. Ivan and Misha also raised their hands. Stephen looked at me and Sephie, asking, “so, you two think she’s just a pawn, then?”

I’m so

“She might’ve known part of the plan. Like I’m sure she knew she was supposed to try and get close to me. Which, sidebar, I have to say grateful to not be a normal girl. If I would’ve had to listen to her divulge details about her and Armando’s s*x life, I might’ve stabbed myself in the eye. But I don’t think she knew she was being ‘given’ to Armando and I don’t think she knows she’s being “given” to Martin either,” Sephie said.

“I agree with Sephie. I think she only knew minimal details. I don’t think she realizes she’s been a pawn this entire time. I think she thinks she has more control over her destiny than she actually does,” I said. “The bigger question is what we do with her, especially if she hasn’t known she’s been a pawn. It’ll be easy if she’s known all along, but I’m at a loss on what to do with her if she hasn’t.”

“Normal people don’t have to deal with these kinds of questions,” Sephie said under her breath. She looked at me, grinning. Her eyes were clearly all green. She recognized the look on my face. She closed her eyes briefly. When she opened them again, they were normal once again. She was already beginning to get a handle on their new tricks. The only one that seemed to still catch her off guard was when she felt fear. She’d always struggled to control that emotion when she felt it, but I had a feeling it was because she never really let herself feel it.

When you’re fighting for your life, you can’t let the fear take over. She’d gotten so good at ignoring her fear in order to get through whatever was happening to her that now she didn’t know what to do with the fear when it would come up for her. That’s likely why it was such a strong reaction and why it changed her eyes to a completely different color. She had years of fear bottled up inside, waiting to be expressed.

It seemed silly to think about, but it made me happy that she finally felt safe enough to be able to feel her fear. While I never wanted her to fear anything, I wanted her to know she was safe enough to feel anything she needed to feel. That included fear, as odd as that seemed. She was safe.

She quietly walked back to me, noticing me lost in my thoughts once more. She wrapped her arms around my waist, smiling sweetly at me. “I know what you’re thinking again,” she said. As she looked at me, I saw her eyes turn completely blue. The normal deepest depth of the ocean blue that was always present when her eyes were normal. The same blue that meant she was thinking about how much she loved me. I stood there, completely lost in her gaze for a few moments. I brushed a few curls from her face, feeling completely overwhelmed with just how much she meant to me.

While everything around us seemed to be completely falling apart, I had never been more sure about her. About our relationship. About her feelings for me. Or about my feelings for her. She was my anchor in the chaos. I knew, without a doubt, that she would be by my side through every single thing I had to endure. Until my last breath.

She grinned at me. “Plus infinity. Plus one,” she said, pressing her lips gently to mine. Of course, she read my mind. I wrapped my arms around her, picking her up off the floor. She smiled against my lips. “I love you,” she said quietly, giggling softly.

“I love you, Sephie. More than I ever thought possible,” I said, as I set her down. Andrei and Viktor walked back into the penthouse. It was difficult to read their expressions.

“What’s the verdict?” Ivan asked.

Andret sighed. “I don’t think she knows she’s been used this whole time. It’s actually kind of sad.”

“How do you know for sure?” Stephen asked.

“I didn’t want her to know that we know about Martin, but I figured Armando was fair game, I also figured it would be fun to f**k up their plans just a bit, so I told her Armando was dead. I asked her where she wanted us to send her,” he said. “She did get emotional about Armando. She hasn’t asked about him, but at least to me, it looked like a genuine response.”

“She might’ve been worried for her own fate more than sorry about Armando, but there was emotion there, at the very least,” Viktor said.

“Once she got over that, she got excited. She asked us to send her back to Italy and she wanted to know how soon she could leave. She started talking about seeing her family again and how excited she was to be going back,” Andrei said.

“Given that she switches to Italian when she gets excited, I recorded her so Sephie could tell us what she said,” Viktor said, pulling his phone from his pocket. He started the recording so we could all hear, handing the phone to Sephie so she could replay anything she needed to hear again.

We could hear her get emotional after Andrei lied to her about Armando. Then we heard her excitement when he asked where she wanted to go. She started speaking quickly, half in English, half in Italian before she switched completely to Italian. Sephie stopped the recording. “She’s saying that she’s going to Italy and that Martin can meet her there, although she never says his name. She calls him ‘mio amato. Um, it’s like saying “my beloved,” she said. “Unless she has someone else she’s sending risqué texts to, I’m going to assume she’s talking about Martin.” She started the recording again, listening to the last bit of the conversation. “She’s saying how happy she is that no one is going to get hurt and once he comes to Italy they can disappear from there. F**k, she actually thinks he’s gonna save her,” she said.

I could feel Sephie’s fear coming on strongly again, although I couldn’t figure out why. I reached for her, just as she looked up at me revealing her almost white eyes again. Ivan was standing next to me. He moved closer to her, almost like he wanted to protect her, and caught a glimpse, but she quickly looked at him and shook her head no, discreetly. He looked away immediately as she buried her face in my shoulder. I suspected that Ivan was beginning to be able to feel her fear, even at lower levels as well, as she didn’t give any outward signs of anything being wrong, but I could feel she was inwardly in complete turmoil. She kept her face hidden against my shoulder, but said, “what if she finds out and refuses to go to Martin? What if they sell her to teach her a lesson?”

Chapter Three Hundred Forty-Four

Adrik

“We won’t let that happen, princess. I don’t know what to do with her, but it’s clear she doesn’t need to go back to Italy and she doesn’t need to go to South America either. I think we’re going to have to tell her what’s going on,” Ivan said, his voice had the soft tone that I only ever heard him use with her.

“We may not like her, but that’s f**ked up,” Stephen said. “Surely we can come up with an option to give her a fresh start on life. Away from her family. They give new meaning to dysfunctional.”

Viktor’s phone beeped. Sephie just held it out for someone to grab, without moving her face from my shoulder and neck. Viktor took it, looking at the message. “She’s telling Martin. They’re all going to think Armando is dead by tonight,” he said, somewhat amused.

“I mean, is it a lie though?” Andrei asked. “He’s not dead, yet.”

We waited for Martin to respond to her text, but there was nothing. I saw Andrel’s eyes glaze over, which meant he was getting more information than the rest of us. I waited for him to snap back to reality, my arms still holding Sephie tightly. She kept her face hidden against my neck and shoulder so they couldn’t see her eyes as she worked to calm down. The guys noticed Andrei’s look, so they all turned to look at him expectantly. Ivan glanced back at me, a questioning look on his face with a slight nod toward Sephie, silently asking about her while everyone else was distracted. I mouthed “talk later to him, which satisfied his curiosity for the time being.

Andrei joined us in the present once again, surprised to see us all staring at him, waiting for news. “I still have to work on being subtle. Clearly,” he said.

“What do you know now that none of us know yet?” Viktor asked.

“They know Trino is gone. That’s why he’s not responding to Giana’s text yet. They’re searching for Trino. She’s not going to be happy that he ignores her. She’s liable to explode on him when he does finally respond,” he said.

Stephen looked at Misha, asking, “you’re sure that Trino made it out safely though? They’re not going to find him? He had a good head start, but there’s no telling who is working with Martin at this point.” He was obviously worried about Trino being on his own.

Misha nodded his head. “He took one of his vehicles when he left, but the vehicle at his parents’ house was not the same one. He’s changing vehicles along the way to lose them. Trino is smart. He’ll make it.”

Viktor’s phone beeped again. “She’s worried now that he’s not answering. She wants to know when he can come to Italy to get her, so she knows when to tell us to send her there.”

I felt Sephie sigh as she thought about the possibilities of Giana going back to Italy. “These people are f**king evil,” she said quietly.

“How long until Trino makes it to his parents’ house?” Ivan asked.

I pulled my phone from my pocket, showing him the location that Trino sent me. He studied it for a few minutes, calculating the time it would take to make it there, best case. “We still have a couple hours to wait,” he finally said.

Andrei walked to the kitchen, saying, “I’ll make the coffee.”

Sephie sighed, but finally looked up at me, silently asking if it was okay to look at everyone else. I smiled sweetly at her, still lost in her once again normal eyes. Even normal, her eyes were still gorgeous and unique. She smiled at me, then turned toward the guys. “I need something to do. I’ll make the cookies,” she said, following Andrei to the kitchen. We all followed her toward the kitchen. Misha was clearly excited about this development in his life. He was practically bouncing as he walked next to her. “I love you so much right now, gazelle,” he said, throwing his arm around her shoulders.

Before she got started on her latest kitchen project, I walked up behind her, my arms around her waist. She leaned back against me as she pulled bowls from one of the cabinets. “How long are you going to be occupied, love?” I asked, kissing her neck gently.

“About an hour. Do you need to go downstairs?” she asked, curious.

“No, but I need to make a few calls and I need to discuss what Ivan saw earlier with him,” I said quietly. She immediately understood. “Go. I’ll keep everyone distracted,” she said, hugging my arms before I stepped away.

I caught Ivan’s eye, motioning for him to follow me to one of the spare rooms. The other four glanced at us, but said nothing as Sephie was starting a conversation with them to get everyone’s mind off of the drama at hand.

As we walked into the room, Ivan shut the door behind him. “I need to call Panama and we should discuss what you saw earlier. I have a feeling you’re starting to feel more of her emotions, so it’s only a matter of time before you find out,” I said.

He nodded his head. “It started a day or two ago when she finally let herself feel the fear she’s been ignoring. F**k me, I don’t know how she stays so calm when it happens. She jokes about being out of control emotionally, but if I felt things as strongly as she does, I’d need to be admitted to an asylum.”

“You’re not wrong there,” I said. “She’s the opposite of out of control.”

“I’m guessing her eyes turn almost white when she’s scared?” Ivan asked.

“They do. That’s not all they do now, either, but it’s definitely the most obvious. It’s actually scarier than her demon eyes, if I’m being honest. We haven’t told anyone because of me. I first saw it happen the first time we had s*x again after she’s been hurt for so long. I’ve missed her so much this time that I was enjoying having a piece of her all to myself,” I said.

“Nobody faults you for that. It’s necessary. You’ve also been very generous in allowing all of us ample time with her while she was healing so that we could deal with what happened better than after the ball. They all noticed and they’re all very appreciative,” Ivan said.

“I understand you guys need her too. But I felt myself getting slightly jealous, so I wanted to keep this between us for now. I’m starting to think it won’t be much longer though and one of them is going to see it, much like you did tonight. She’s trying hard to control it, but she doesn’t always know when it’s happening. She can make them go dark at will and she’s starting to be able to control a few other colors, but the white that’s brought on by her fear is almost out of control for her. It feels like she doesn’t know what to do with the fear when she feels it. She almost had a complete meltdown the first time it happened. All because she was terrified to be apart from me,” I said. “She started shaking as bad as she ever has and she casually mentioned that she tends to get hurt very badly when she and I are apart. It almost knocked the wind out of me it hit me so hard.”

Ivan looked at me, his eyes going wider the more he thought about it. “She’s absolutely right. I never put that together. I know why you separated yourself from her, both times, but both times ended very badly for her. That’s justified terror.”

“I agree. And I’m never going to be apart from her again because of it. In fact, I’ve decided to give her the ring before this whole mess is taken care of She knows I love her, but she needs to know that she’s stuck with me,” I said, smiling at the thought.

“Somehow I don’t think she’ll mind,” he said. “What other colors are her eyes turning, if you don’t mind me asking? You can tell me to suck it, for the record.”

I inhaled. “I don’t mind you knowing. I would’ve put money on you being the first one to see it anyway, because of your special relationship with her. So far, they turn black when she’s angry, almost white when she’s afraid, completely green when she’s being sarcastic, and they turn deep blue when she thinks about me and how much she loves me. She calls them her mood ring eyes now. She also said she might need to get contacts. She’s worried about scaring all my business associates away if she can’t get control of it,” I said, laughing.

“She makes a solid point,” Ivan said, laughing with me. “I won’t tell the others about it until you do and I’ll try to keep an eye on her when you’re not around to make sure they’re not changing without her knowing it.”

“Sometimes she knows when it happens, but she said she feels like they’re going rogue. The more times it happens, the more control she’s getting over it, but you know how she is. Sometimes she’s unexpectedly hit with very strong feelings. After what happened with Trino’s guys, I feel the need to protect her from everyone else. You guys I’m not worried about. I’m just being selfish for now.”

“Be selfish as long as you want. No one is going to argue,” he said.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket, searching through the saved numbers trying to find one specific number. “I need to call Panama,” I said as I scrolled through the list of contacts.

“What old friends do you have in Panama?” Ivan asked.

“My father.

**The second book has been combined with this one. If you click through to

Chapter 345

chapter 345, that is the first chapter of the second book. There is no longer a need to go to the separate book. The second book is also not complete yet, but will be soon. Apologies for the confusion, this was not my

decision to make.

Sephie

As Adrik and Ivan were walking away from the kitchen, I asked everyone's input on the type of cookie I should be making. I had no idea they would all have such strong feelings on what kind of cookie they needed, but it turned into quite a spirited debate.

"I just feel like regular chocolate chip cookies are classic. Timeless, really," Misha said. "Like me."

"But they're boring. And overdone. And sometimes you get one that makes you wish you hadn't taken a bite of cookie," Stephen said, which made Viktor laugh. His deep belly laugh filled the kitchen."

"Shortbread is the way to go. It might seem plain, but nothing made with that much butter can ever be bad," Andrei said. "And you can also put frosting on them. Win-win."

"I don't know, I agree with both of you, but I feel like Andrei makes a very valid argument with the frosting," I said, laughing at Misha's indignant expression when he found out I agreed more with Andrei.

"You can put frosting on chocolate chip cookies, too," he said.

"Feels like overkill that way," Viktor said.

"I agree with Viktor," I said, walking to the pantry for something. "What about you, Papa Bear? I feel like you're a peanut butter guy. Simple, hardy, dependable, goes well with milk." I could hear his deep laugh as I walked in the pantry.

"You're right. It is my favorite. My wife used to make peanut butter cookies that she would dip in chocolate. It's a miracle I didn't gain 50 pounds the first year we were married. I think I talked her into making those cookies at least once a week," Viktor said. He was smiling as he fondly remembered that period of his life.

"That sounds amazing, if I'm being honest," I said, measuring out ingredients for the still to be determined cookies.

"They were. I don't think there was anything special about them. It was just a peanut butter cookie, dipped in chocolate, but I couldn't get enough of them," he said.

"I'll see if I can recreate them, if you like. But it might not be the same. The chef is always the secret ingredient," I said.

Viktor smiled his sweet smile at me. "I will never turn down anything you make for me, sestrichka."

I winked at Viktor, then turned to Stephen. I studied him for a minute, then said, "shi t, yours is a chocolate cookie, isn't it?"

He laughed. "Why is that a bad thing?"

"Because they're actually the hardest to master. It sounds so simple, but you can f**k up a chocolate cookie faster than anything else. Of course that would be your favorite. They're so deceptively complicated, but when it's right, it's divine. Not unlike you," I said.

"I never would have guessed that talking about our favorite types of cookie would leave me so vulnerably diagnosed, but here we are," Stephen said, laughing.

"What about you, spider monkey?" Andrei asked.

"Guers."

Andrei thought for a moment, squinting his eyes as he tried to analyze me. "Sugar cookie?" he asked like he wasn't sure.

"You're not wrong, but you're not completely right either. Keep going, Bubba," I said.

He thought for a minute more, then I saw him get the answer. "Lemon sugar cookie," he said, his wide smile stretching across his face.

I nodded, unable to hide my amusement at his boyishly handsome smile. "But why, though?" 1 asked. I didn't think I would stump him with my question, but I did. It was actually Stephen that answered.

"Because it's simple, sweet, with a hint of tangy. Not unlike you," he said, smiling at me.

"Yoden for the win," I said.

"I had the simple part, but it would've taken me longer to get the rest," Andrei said, laughing. "Stephen might be as good as me at reading minds."

"What about Ivan? What are your best guesses for his favorite?" Misha asked.

Stephen and I both looked at each other, grinning. "Biscotti," we both said at the same time.

"Is that even a cookie?" Misha asked.

"It's why it's perfect. Is Ivan even a real person?" Stephen asked, laughing. It just so happened that Ivan and Adrik walked back in right as he said that which caused more laughter from everyone. Stephen apologized when he saw Ivan.

"Don't apologize. I ask myself that question almost daily," Ivan said, laughing with us. "What on earth are you guys discussing?"

"We've been debating what everyone's favorite cookie is and what it says about them," Andrei said, laughing loudly when he saw the look on Ivan and Adrik's faces. "It's actually pretty enlightening," he said, defending our debate. Adrik just laughed, shaking his head.

He walked to me, wrapping his arms around my waist as he stood behind me. I had my hands full, so he rested his chin on my shoulder, watching what I was doing, happy to be near me. "I love you and your randomness," he said, still chuckling.

"Bubba wasn't lying. It's been very enlightening." I said, still laughing.

"What's your favorite cookie, Ivan?" Misha asked.

"I don't really like cookies that much. Or any kind of sweets. I never had it as a kid, so I don't think I ever developed a taste for sweet things. But I'll eat an entire package of biscotti if it's in front of me," he said, smiling.

"You heard them say that, didn't you?" Andrei and Misha both said at the same time.

"Heard who say what?" Ivan asked.

"Stephen and Sephie said that was your favorite cookie before you two came back to the kitchen. That's when I asked if it was even a cookie and Stephen asked if you were actually a real person," Misha said, now even more amused with the conversation than he was before..

"I enjoy the f**kery as much as you do, Misha, but I did not hear them this time. I just heard Stephen ask if I was real. Still undecided, for the record," Ivan said.

Adrik had moved to lean against the counter beside me, his arms folded across his chest. He was watching everyone, laughing at our silliness, enjoying a moment of peace before what we all knew was coming.

"Ok, what about Boss? Who can guess his favorite?" Misha asked. He was not going to let this conversation d ie yet and I loved him for it.

I glanced at Adrik, searching his eyes for a moment to find the answer. I smiled when I found it.

"Nope. Nope. Sephie's not allowed to answer. She's clearly cheating. Andrei can't answer either. They have a clear advantage," Misha said.

"You're very bossy when it comes to cookies, my adorable Russian guardian."

I watched Ivan and Viktor look at each other, then Viktor said, "it's probably exactly the same one as Sephie. Maybe with a flavor twist, but he

probably likes it because he knew as a 5-year-old that it was her favorite so he made it his too."

I couldn't contain my laughter. Neither could Adrik. "What's her favorite, then?" Adrik asked.

"Lemon sugar cookie," Misha said. "Was Viktor right?"

Adrik laughed. "He was. He was also right about the flavor twist. I like orange better. And they have been my favorite since I was 5. One of my father's chefs used to make them for me regularly when he found out I liked them."

"Why didn't I think of that," Misha said, shaking his head.

"If nothing else, we're having the important conversations here. We're changing the world right now, boys," I said, laughing, I suspected my eyes would turn green, so I looked at Adrik when I said it. I recognized the look on his face, so I closed my eyes briefly, trying to switch them back to normal.

"As much as I've enjoyed this conversation, I also want to know what old friends you have in Panama," Viktor said, looking at Adrik.

"My father," he said. "I just called him."

"I thought he was in Europe?" Viktor said.

"He was during the summer. He likes to migrate south for the winter," Adrik said.

"So, his guys are going after Trino?" Stephen asked.

Adrik nodded his head. "I told him Trino would be there tonight, but he needed a day or two before they got him out, given the situation with his m om. He said he would send a team tonight to make sure Trino stayed safe, but they wouldn't make contact for a couple days."

"Does your father know Trino?" I asked, curious.

"He does. Trino was making a name for himself before I took over for my father. Trino made his move shortly after I took over, partly because we had already worked out a deal for after he took over. The guy he took power from was hated by pretty much everyone. It was in my best interest to support Trino. My father saw it coming a few years before Trino got the idea, although he wasn't sure if it would be Trino or another guy that was similarly positioned as Trino," Adrik said.

"What happened to that guy?"

"He still runs part of Trino's business. He decided he didn't want to be in charge when it came down to it, but he said he'd support Trino in taking over the previous guy," he said.

"What happens after Vitaliy's guys get Trino out of Colombia?" Viktor asked.

"We're going to go fetch him," Adrik said. He looked to me as he said it. I could tell he was uncertain about whether I'd be able to make the trip. Or would want to make the trip.

"Everyone is going to fetch him?" I asked. I knew the answer, but I wanted to toy with him.

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Chapter 346

Sephte

“Everyone is going to fetch him?” I asked. I knew the answer, but I wanted to toy with him.

“As long as you think you can make that trip, solnishko,” Adrik said, hesitantly. “But i would like you to meet my father.” He looked almost shy about his request. I could feel his uncertainty.

“Of course I’ll go. I would like to meet him as well,” I said, unable to string him along any longer. He relaxed as soon as I said I would go.

“We need to figure out security for Trino,” Ivan said. “He shouldn’t use any of his guys he has now going forward. It wouldn’t surprise me if they were all loyal to Martin now.”

“What about Chris or Keith?” I asked. “You guys have been training them still, right?”

“That might work,” Viktor said. “They’ve progressed in their training. You’d be proud of them.”

“You might have too many guys volunteer once they find out they’ll be spending their time in Colombia. I would imagine the winters there are much easier than the winters here,” I said.

Viktor langhed. “Most of our guys are from Eastern Europe or Russia. The winters here are mild, sestrichka. They all love it here.”

“Valid point. I do not know what winters are like in Russia. I’m also fairly positive I do not want to know what winters are like in Russia,” I said, pulling the cookies out of the oven. Misha was overly excited since I ended up going with chocolate chips, since that was the easiest solution for the evening’s bake. Andrei got up to make a fresh pot of coffee to go with the cookies. After pulling the cookies from the oven, I leaned against the counter, watching everyone again, enjoying the moment of peace. I loved that they had a place where they could talk about stupid things like types of cookies and just forget about everything we were facing at the moment. I knew how stressed everyone was. I was fairly certain a couple of them were having trouble sleeping. They were constantly on edge and tense. But they got a few hours to forget about it all and just be friends. It was quickly becoming one of my favorite things.

The kitchen grew quiet as everyone enjoyed warm cookies and coffee. We heard Adrik’s phone beep. Then we heard Viktor’s phone beep.

“You first,” I said, looking at Adrik.

He glanced at the message. “Trino is safe. He said to tell you that you already know how much he needs to thank you for making him leave tonight.”

I felt the tears welling up in my eyes as I thought about his situation. I knew how heartbroken he would be to lose his mother, but I also knew how much peace it would bring him to know he got to see her one last time. I wiped the tears from my eyes as Adrik walked to me, pulling me to him. I saw the look of surprise on his face as he held my gaze. I raised my eyebrow, trying to figure out what they were doing now. “They’re golden brown now. Almost amber,” he whispered, as he held me against him tightly.

Viktor’s phone beeped again. And again. And again. “Is that her or him?” Ivan asked, trying not to laugh.

Viktor looked at his phone. “It’s both. He finally got back to her and she responded. Andrei was right. She’s not happy he waited so long to respond.”

“What did he say about her going to Italy?” Misha asked.

“He’s not happy about us sending her anywhere. He says he’s still going to come get her,” Viktor said.

I stood up straighter, looking at Andrei, then looking at Misha. Finally, I looked at Ivan. “Is that fishy to you guys?” I asked.

“Very,” Ivan said.

“What do you want to bet that Martin getting Giana as payment is contingent on something specific happening here?” Stephen said.

“She’s not happy with that plan,” Viktor said. He got up to hand me his phone. “She must be cussing him out again, because I can’t imagine this is a

1/2

situation that calls for dirty talk.”

“Maybe it is and we’re just so old now that we have no clue,” I said. I read through her texts. She could definitely type faster in Italian than she could in English. She sent five more lengthy texts in a matter of seconds. “Oh, she’s definitely cussing him out. She wants to know why he’s being stubborn. Lots of creative name calling, though. I’ll give her that. She says that if he comes here to get her, then there’s a chance she’ll die. If she goes to Italy, she’ll be safe. More name calling. More regret over sleeping with him. More threats of her trying to escape on her own. She also says she might escape and disappear on her own. She doesn’t need him. More name calling.” I looked up at all of their amused faces. “She’s very creative on the name calling. I didn’t expect that. It’s like her

Viktor’s phone was silent for a few moments, then Martin responded. I looked at the texts. He responded in Italian. “Well, that’s surprising. He’s responding in Italian,” I said, reading through his texts. I suddenly felt very sick to my stomach. “Oh my God… he’s threatening her.” I quickly handed the phone to Adrik then I ran to the nearest bathrooms, hoping to make it in time. Luckily, most of the contents of my stomach had already been digested, but I did puke up the cookie I ate. Not gonna lie, one of the more pleasant puking experiences I’d had in my life.

I felt Adrik’s warm hands on my back. “Talk to me, love. What happened?” He ran his hand lightly over my back until I was sure I was done. When I

stood

1. he handed me a towel. I went to the sink to wash my mouth out and splashed water on my face as well. I groaned as I wiped my face.

“I don’t even like her but I’m scared for her. Martin is very much like Anthony, it seems. He turned evil on her quick. He told her that she belonged to him and he would decide what happened, not her. He said if she ever spoke to him like that again, he would arrange for her to be kidnapped and sold as a slave. It was her choice. She could either do what she was told or be sold off,” I said.

Adrik looked at me thoughtfully. “While I don’t like any of that, why did it make you vomit? You know we won’t let that happen asked, turning me around to face him.

TO

her, right?” he

I looked up at him, not really knowing how to answer. I leaned against the bathroom sink, my hands fidgeting with the buttons on his shirt. I thought a few minutes, still not sure of the answer. He gently lifted my chin, so I would look at him. He calmly searched my eyes, looking for the answer that I couldn’t articulate. I saw the recognition on his face when he found what he was looking for.

for:

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Chapter 347

Sephie

“You have been in similar situations to her, solnishko. The fear you’re feeling now is the fear you wouldn’t let yourself feel when you were in them. You’ve seen true evil like Martin before, but you couldn’t let yourself respond to it before. You can now. Everything that’s happening to Giana right. now is reminding you of something in your past that you’ve survived, but you never let yourself be scared for you so you’re scared for her,” he said. “Stephen was right. It’s important that you let yourself be afraid. You’ve been keeping it locked away for too long. Just like he’s been feeding his monster, your fear has been growing, too. I can feel how out of control it is when it comes up. I know you don’t know what to do with it. Ivan can feel it too. You’re so in control of all your other emotions, but the fear takes you by surprise every single time. I think that’s why your eyes change to a completely different color when you’re afraid. You have to let yourself feel it. It’s okay to feel it. That’s the only way you can learn how to control it.”

“It feels like it’s trying to take over every time and I start to panic. For the first few months after my uncle started beating me, I remember being terrified. I panicked, I didn’t know what to do, so I did nothing. The beatings lasted forever. Because I did nothing. Eventually something snapped and I stopped feeling anything when it would happen. No fear, just pain. I learned I could live with pain, but I never learned I could live with fear. I don’t know what to do with it,” I said.

“Fear can be useful, but mostly it’s just a reminder,” he said.

“Of what?”

“That you’re alive,” he said. He chuckled when I stayed silent, not knowing what to say. “We’ll talk about it more later. They’re going to be worried about you,” he said, taking my hand and leading me out of the bathroom.

Do

we want to know what he said to her?” Ivan asked when we walked back to the kitchen..

“Martin and Anthony are very similar,” Adrik said. “He threatened to sell Giana if she disobeyed him. Did she respond?”

“Yeah, but she’s responded in Italian. It’s much shorter than her earlier texts, though. And that was the end of the conversation,” Viktor said. I walked to him, holding my hand out to read the text, but he hesitated before handing his phone to me. “You don’t have to read it, Sephie.”

“No, it’ll help me figure out her next move if I see how she responded. If she immediately cowers to him and grovels, then it’s going to make our job much harder. I’m worried she’ll think she brought it on herself and that he’s still the only one that can save her. I don’t know how much damage Armando did to her brain while she was with him. She might not be salvageable,” I said.

He handed me his phone. I read through the text, sighing. “She’s gonna be problematic.” I scrolled back through Martin’s text to her, so I could read it. to the guys. “He told her ‘you belong to me now and you will do what you’re told or I will arrange your kidnapping. Keep disrespecting me and I’ll sell you as a sl ave.” I thought before that it was fishy that he wouldn’t want her to go to Italy. Now I don’t know if it’s just some weird power move on his part or if there is a contingency on him getting her or if he’s just completely lost his grip on reality.” I scrolled back down to Giana’s response. “She apologizes and says she loves him and that she’ll do what she’s told.”

“Is she just saying that to placate him, though?” Stephen asked.

“Possible,” Andrei said.

Viktor’s phone beeped, but it was a new message, not one between Giana and Martin. I handed his phone back to him. “That’s a new message, I don’t want to be nosey.”

He looked at the new message, surprised. “She’s texting someone else,” he said. He handed the phone back to me. “Whoever it is, she’s texting in Italian still.”

I looked at her newest message. “She’s telling this person that this is her new number.”

“I kind of doubt she’d be texting her family,” Stephen said. “A friend, maybe?”

The response came in. “Looks like you’re right, Yoden. This person says they haven’t talked to her in forever. Asking how she is, says they miss her, and where is she. So maybe not the closest friend?”

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Giana replied fairly quickly. “She tells this person she needs their help. She asks where this person is. Spain. Giana says she can get to Spain, but she needs help hiding from her family. She says she’s done with them and that they went back on their promise. She says she thought she’d found a way out, but it’s worse than her family. She needs to disappear.”

“I wonder what her family promised her? Had to be to get her to take the job with Armando,” Ivan said.

“This person says they can hide her, but she needs to pay her own way. Oh. Well, then. She says that won’t be a problem, she can support them both. She just needs help to hide and she needs help getting new identification cards.” I looked up at them. “So there we go. We get her new ID and send her to Spain. I bet she has access to Armando’s accounts. As long as no one else does, she should be set for a while, if she lives smartly.”

Viktor and Ivan looked at each other. “We can get her new ID in a day or two. What else does she need?”

“She’s got plenty of clothes. She’s also likely got plenty of money to buy new ones. She can leave everything here if she wants to travel light. Are you going to put her on a commercial flight or a private plane?” I asked.

“Commercial. We’ll be using the plane to get Trino,” Adrik said.

“So, ticket. New ID with a new name. Ride to the airport and she’s off to start her new life. No one will be able to find her.” Viktor’s phone beeped again. “She asks where in Spain. Okay, she’s going to Madrid. Giana says she’ll be there in a few days. So, better get started on that new passport right away, boys,” I said, handing Viktor his phone back.

“That’ll be good. One less thing to have to worry about here and I can pull the guards off her for other things. I had to put extra guys on her because of her tantrums and her tendency to sneak off,” Viktor said. He was very obviously still annoyed about it.

“I share in your annoyance, but it does not detract from how once again you guys are going the extra mile to make sure somebody we all hat e is safe,” Isaid. “It’s like you guys are good or something.”

Three days later, a bag was dropped off at Giana’s apartment in the morning. In it, she found a new ID, new passport, a ticket to Madrid, a little bit of cash, and a new cell phone with a note to leave her old one as it was compromised. The new cell phone was still in the sealed box, to prove that it was, not compromised. The note also told her a taxi would be waiting for her at a specific time and wished her well.

Ivan watched on the monitors as she left the building and got into the taxi that was waiting to take her to the airport. Once she was safely in the taxi, he gave Viktor word that she was taken care of and we were free to leave for Panama. Ivan met us in the parking garage as we left for the private airport. I had to admit that I felt incredible relief to know that Giana had a chance at a fresh start. She had texted her friend a few more times over the course of the previous few days and given her friend more details. The friend seemed genuinely distraught for Giana and promised she would be safe. Her friend had said she was thinking of moving again soon and that Giana could come with her, so it would be even more difficult to find her. It appeared that Giana would get a second chance.

Sephte

Adrik and I took over one of the couches on the plane. We hadn't slept very much the night before, but neither one of us could fully take the blame. I think I woke him up just as many times as he woke me up. I laid down in between him and the back of the couch once we were in the air while he used his coat as a blanket for me. It was also cover so he could slide his hands under my shirt and down my pants, wanting no barrier between his hands and my body. We really couldn't get enough of each other.

Fortunately, the flight was long enough that we both got a nap in so we were both feeling better once we landed. Only now we were both nervous for me to meet Adrik's father. He was nervous because his father could be a very gruff man and he was worried he would say something that would offend me. I was worried that his father would find some reason to not like me. We were both acting like children worrying over nothing, but neither one of us could stop.

Vitaliy's men were waiting for us at the small air strip when we landed. We still had a short drive to get to Vitaliy's ranch once we left the airport. The guys knew a couple of Vitaliy's men that came to get us, but a couple were new. One man walked up to Adrik, as soon as we were off the plane. He was much older than Adrik, as well as all the guys, but he still looked lethal despite his age. He wasn't nearly as tall as Adrik, but he was built like a house. I caught myself wondering how difficult it was for him to walk through doorways when he was so wide. He had grey, almost white hair and his clean-shaven face clearly showed a few scars.

Adrik smiled when he saw the man. "Aleksei. It's good to see you again, my friend," he said as he opened his arms for Aleksei. They embraced each other, talking quietly, and laughing like old friends. Adrik stepped away from him and held his hand out to me. I stepped closer to Adrik as he put his arm around my waist and held me against him. I caught Aleksei's surprise when he saw Adrik do so.

"Sephie, this is Aleksei. He's been working for my father as long as I've been alive. Aleksei, this is Sephie," he said. It was evident that it was somewhat of a surprise that I was there, but Aleksei was a gentleman and didn't make a big deal out of it. I extended my hand to him, telling him it was nice to meet him and trying to give him my warmest smile. I could see the tough exterior crack slightly when I smiled at him.

"Sephie is a very unusual name," he said as he was carefully studying me.

"Aleksei probably isn't that common around here either. Should we fascinate the locals later?" I asked. I thought Viktor had the best loud laugh I'd ever heard, but Aleksei's laugh was a very close second. His laugh shook his body. He looked at Adrik, saying in Russian, "I've never known you to bring a woman around your father. Smart choice to wait until you found this one. He's going to love her." Adrik smiled at me, knowing that I would want to respond.

"If that's all it takes for him to love me, you gentlemen need to get out more," I replied. When he heard me speak Russian, his eyes went wide. Ivari had walked up beside us during this exchange, laughing at Aleksei's response to me knowing Russian.

"You'll come to understand very quickly that she's one of a kind," Ivan said, grinning down at me.

The exchange with Aleksei at the airport helped to calm my nerves a little more. Apparently, it completely disarmed him as well. He talked almost the entire way to the ranch. He asked questions about the city, but he asked questions about people and places in the city. He didn't want to know about the bosses and the larger problem. It was obvious that he missed specific things about the city, as well as specific people. He asked about a specific restaurant that I had never heard about and said he desperately missed this one particular dish he used to order there. Ivan, who was in the front seat beside Aleksei, asked him what the dish was. When Aleksei answered, I already knew Ivan's plan to endear me to them øyen more.

I said to Ivan quietly, "okay, but don't come complaining to me when they start visiting too much." Aleksei was still talking so he didn't hear me. Ivan had to cough to keep from laughing.

Adrik pulled me closer, whispering in my ear, "you don't have to do anything while we're down here, love."

"I know I don't, but I want them to like me," I said.

"You don't have to do anything more than be yourself and that will happen," he said, kissing my temple.

Vitaliy's ranch was secluded. I would've missed the driveway, as it didn't look like an entrance to anything from the main road. As we drove along the driveway, there were steep mountains in the distance. Plant life was lush, making everything so green that it almost hurt your eyes. Compared to the hibernation of everything back home for the winter, Panama was bursting with life. Adrik caught my look of wonderment as I took in the landscape. "I see now why your father likes to migrate in the winter," I said.

We pulled up to an expansive house. It reminded me of Trino's island house. There was only one floor, but the house seemingly went on forever. "I'm definitely getting lost later," I mumbled to myself as we stood outside while the guys grabbed our bags from the vehicles. Andrei had walked up beside me, so he heard me. "You and me both," he said, taking in the house.

Aleksei showed us to our rooms, then waited to take us further into the house to Vitaliy. We walked through a few rooms, finally reaching the back of the house. I could see Trino sitting at a table with an older man, who I assumed to be Vitaliy. His hair was still mostly dark like Adrik's, but he also had prominent grey throughout. He was clean shaven. Even sitting, I could tell he was a much larger man than Trino. Trino nodded in our direction, which caused Vitaliy to look toward us. The resemblance between him and Adrik was very strong, but Adrik had a softness to his expression that Vitally lacked. Vitaliy was hardened. It was the first thing I noticed about him. It was likely the first thing he wanted you to notice about him.

When Vitally looked in our direction, I felt Adrik stiffen beside me. His posture was always good, but he made sure it was perfect. It made me want to stand up a little straighter too. Vitaliy and Trino both stood up and walked toward us. Vitaliy was tall, but not as tall as Adrik. He opened his arms for Adrik as we got closer. "My son," he said. Although I know he meant it warmly, it was anything but. I caught myself wondering if he was capable of it. Adrik embraced his father. The embrace he shared with Aleksei was more genuine than what I was witnessing between him and his father.

When Adrik stepped away from me, the guys instinctively stepped closer, almost surrounding me. I was used to them being protective of me, but I was confused as to why they would be so now. Adrik spoke to his father briefly, thanking him for getting Trino. I caught Trino's eye as they talked, knowing Trino wouldn't be able to understand what they were saying, since they were speaking Russian. I raised an eyebrow at him, wanting to know how he was holding up. He placed his hand over his heart and bowed his head. I nodded to him when he looked back up at me.

Vitaliy's attention shifted to me, asking Adrik who I was. I was starting to understand that Adrik hadn't told his father I would be with them. Adrik, who very rarely got nervous, looked at me, then back to his father. He said in English, "this is Sephie. My future wife." He extended his hand to me, the guys made room for me to walk to him. I was a little shocked that he had called me his future wife, but tried to play it cool. We'd talked about it before. He'd just never actually called me that before. I knew I wasn't going anywhere and I knew he wasn't going anywhere, but it felt different to put a label on it.

Adrik slid his arm around my waist, pulling me into his side. Much like Aleksei, I could see the surprise on Vitaliy's face as he witnessed Adrik's affection toward me. I extended my hand to Vitaliy, saying, "nice to meet you, sir." As soon as my hand made contact with his, his eyes went wide. He cursed under his breath, looking between me and Adrik. He quickly gained control, but it was obvious to me and Adrik that something had just happened. I didn't know what though.

Vitaliy, in an effort to distract from his reaction, said in English, "Sephie is quite an unusual name. Is it short for something?"

I nodded my head. "Persephone." Once more, his eyes went wide and the surprise on his face was evident for everyone to see. He stood, silent, for at moment, then he looked to me once more. He extended his hand to me once again, saying in Russian, "he's been waiting for you for a long time."

"I know. I was waiting for him, too," I said. Vitaliy's face was shocked when I responded in Russian, but we all watched as a very sly smile spread across his face. I heard the collective gasp from the guys behind me. I'm guessing this is the first time this man has smiled in public.

Vitaliy still had a hold of my hand as he looked at me, smiling. His face was still as hardened as ever, but he was obviously pleased. He pulled me toward him, pulling my arm through his. "Come, walk with an old man," he said as he turned away from everyone. The guys all started to follow, but he put his hand up, almost barking at them. "She's safe with me. You stay." He stopped, looking right at Adrik. "You too. We can't talk about you if you tag along," he said matter-of-factly. I could feel Adrik's anger at his father giving him an order, but he was also worried about me being apart from him.

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Chapter 349

Sephte

He had reason to worry. Trying to control my eyes from changing color at a whim was proving to be more difficult than I thought. Luckily, my future husband happened to be very wealthy and could get things made in a very short amount of time. In the few days it took to get Giana's new ID and passport sorted out, he had someone make me a custom pair of contacts that matched my normal eyes. They were almost an exact match to my normal eye color. The guy had made the contacts from a picture of my eyes. I was still getting used to wearing them, but at least I didn't need to worry about anyone seeing anything I didn't want them to see. Ivan was still the only one that knew about it aside from Adrik.

I smiled at Adrik. "I'll be fine. You guys aren't going to listen anyway. You'll be able to see if I need you," I said in Russian, looking from him to the guys, who were clearly not happy with being ordered to stay. Adrik's father or not, they didn't like the idea of me being apart from them in new surroundings. Vitaliy laughed, which caught everyone by surprise. He turned away from everyone, shaking his head, leaving them all in stunned silence.

Once we were far enough away from everyone that he couldn't be heard, he took a deep breath. He placed his hand over mine, which was still holding his arm lightly. "His mother knew you would be coming. I wish she could've met you," he said. I glanced at him. He was deep in thought, but his face softened at the mention of Adrik's mother. I knew she had died when Adrik was very young. He could barely remember her. His father never had another wife, nor did he father any other children after she passed away. He would have girlfriends here and there, but Adrik said he was never very serious about any of them. His father wouldn't speak too much about his mother, so Adrik felt like she was almost a stranger to him. He could barely remember what she looked like. He said when he was younger, he would ask some of his father's men questions about his mother. He got the sense that they all thought fondly of her. Once he got older, he stopped thinking about her.

I got the very clear sense that he felt about her the way Adrik felt about me. I said quietly, "you'll see her again, you know. And you'll fall over again." He walked quietly for a few steps, then I heard him sniffle.

Tin love all

"You're not like normal women. I can feel it. You're different than everyone else except Adrik. He's special too."

Normally, I would've kept my mouth shut about the guys, but something compelled me to tell him everything. I looked into his eyes and I knew he'd been waiting to hear everything I was going to tell him. "You're right about both of us, but not about everyone else. We're not the only ones who are special," I said.

He laughed again, patting my hand. "You've just made his mother a very happy woman. She told me Adrik would find people that were special like him and he would realize all the dreams I had when I ruled the city. And more."

"You should've listened to her," I said, grinning up at him. It made him laugh again.

He looked down at me thoughtfully. "She was very much like you. Most people are scared of me. I like it that way. She never was, though. She saw through it right away. Just as you have. Even Adrik struggles with seeing through it. He thinks I'm a cold man. He's right, but it prevents him from seeing the love I have for him. That's my one regret. I wanted to be softer to him, but I never figured out bow."

"He knows on some level that you love him. He also understands that you needed to make him tough in order to survive this world. He respects you. You might make him nervous, which is somewhat hilarious for me since he never gets nervous about anything, but he respects you. I know him well enough to know that not many people get his respect."

He chuckled as we continued walking. "How long did it take him to tell you his name?" he asked. He looked down at me when he asked the question. He was clearly curious.

"Um, I think like twenty minutes, tops, from the first time I saw him. Maybe less," I said, smiling at the memory.

"You are a special, special girl," he said wistfully. We walked in silence for a while longer while he quietly thought as he kept my arm intertwined with his, his opposite hand on top of mine. I knew he was thinking of Adrik's mother, I just wasn't sure I should bring it up. I guess we'll see how much he

likes direct women…

"You were angry after your wife died, weren't you?" I asked.

"Very much so. I still am some days," he said.

"She helped you control your anger, didn't she?"

He looked down at me, a small smile on his face once again. "Like no one has ever been able to before or since," he said.

"You and your son are not as dissimilar as you think, Vitaliy," I said. "You just take different approaches." He looked slightly confused. "Your anger is chaotic, especially after your wife died. You lost your ability to contain it. It made you a very effective leader, but it also increased the chaos more than was needed at times. Adrik is the same, but he saw the collateral damage of your anger so he fights against that. His anger is more calculated, but when unleashed, it's just as destructive. I'm guessing it's a trait he got from you. I'm also guessing you saw it in him when he was young, which is why you trained him to be your personal a ssassin from a young age."

"I fear sometimes that my anger became his anger. He never knew the reason for my anger. He barely remembers his mother." I could feel the sadness he had when thinking of how much different Adrik would be had his mother not died.

"I don't think you should feel sad about him not knowing his mother. Well, it is sad, but it also made him into the man I love today. Our lives, they've been connected from the beginning. Everything that happened, got us to right here where we are today. For that, I'm incredibly grateful. You should be too. Your son is an incredible man, a fierce leader, and has a heart bigger than anyone I know. He's an amazing man. Whether you feel responsible for that or not, you still had a very big hand in it."

Vitaliy had stopped walking and was surveying the green fields ahead of us. I glanced behind us to see the guys within sight of us. He didn't take his eyes from the scenery around us, he just asked, "they're behind us, aren't they?" He did have a small grin on his face.

"It's my fault. They're very protective of me. They only agreed to let me leave alone because it's you. They get nervous in new situations," I said.

He waved his hand in front of him. "Ah, they're very good at their jobs. I don't fault them for it. I just enjoy giving them shit whenever I can." He looked at me with a devious grin on his face. "They should be protective of you, dear. This world," he said, taking a deep breath, "is dangerous. The likelihood that you'll be used to get to Adrik is very high."

I couldn't help but laugh. "I know, Vitally. Trust me, I know. They've been training me until recently when I got hurt and had to stop until I finish healing. I know exactly the world I'm walking into. Ask the guys later how many times I've kicked their asses."

"I'm very much looking forward to that conversation."

"You can ask Trino, too. He saw me and Misha sparring once. He still hasn't recovered," I said, laughing.

Vitaliy looked at me like a man who was remembering things he hadn't let himself think of in years. "Come, we should go back. You've given an old man a treat. I won't keep you any longer," he said, patting my hand. "I want to hear stories about you from my son now." He looked down at me, winking.

"I'm a stone-cold weirdo, Vitaliy. Don't let him tell you any different," I said as we turned back toward the house. Even from this distance, I could see the relief on the guys' faces as we turned to go back. As we got closer, I made Vitaliy laugh loudly at something absurd that came out of my mouth. Even Aleksei was surprised when we walked back to them.

Vitaliy walked us back to Adrik. He took my hand from his arm, thanking me once more for being kind to an old man. He placed my hand in Adrik's, saying, "you and I have much to discuss, son."

Chapter 350

Sephle

Adrik looked between me and Vitaliy, completely surprised and maybe slightly worried. I smiled at him. “Don’t worry, he just wants to hear stories about what a badass I am,” I said, smirking at Adrik. He immediately relaxed, laughing at me.

“We can help with that, too,” Viktor said.

“Good. I want to hear everything. She needs time with the Colombian anyway. He needs her,” Vitaliy said in Russian as he walked toward the house, expecting everyone to follow him. Adrik looked torn between following his father and staying with me.

I put my hands on his chest. “Go. You’ll be glad you did. He’s right, too. I want to talk to Trino. I have a feeling there’s something he needs said.”

Aleksei had noticed Adrik’s hesitancy to leave me. “Go, I will stay with her and the Colombian. I’ll bring her to you when they’re done. I know where he’s going,” he said, nodding his head toward Vitally.

Adrik glanced at me once more, kissing me gently, then followed his father. The guys looked torn between following Adrik and staying with me. “You can go, too. I’ll be okay. He wasn’t kidding. He really does want to hear stories about me. I promised him glory. You guys better deliver and make me sound way f**king better than I am. I’m talking mythological proportions, fellas. Fables. Epic poetry. Urban legends. All of it.”

Every single one of them gave me their best smiles as they followed Adrik. Aleksei looked at me as they were leaving, his eyebrow raised. “You are very special. He hasn’t smiled in years, much less laughed. I’m not sure how you managed it, but thank you. He needed that.” He didn’t wait for me to respond. He walked a short distance from me and Trino, giving us privacy.

“I’ve really gotta learn Russian if I’m going to keep hanging out with you people,” Trino said cheekily.

“You know, I’ve thought the same about learning Spanish,” I said, laughing. We stood in mostly comfortable silence for a few moments, then I asked. “You were able to see her?”

“Si, Miha. I spent the last few hours with her. She was still lucid enough when I got there that she knew who I was. My father said she’d been in and out most of the day, but she recognized him right before I got there. She told him I was coming, even.” He laughed. “He didn’t believe her. He thought she was hallucinating again, then I showed up ten minutes later.”

“Trino. I’m so sorry, but I’m so thankful you got to see her. I didn’t know about your mother until I’d already told you to leave,” I said, reaching out and putting my hand on his arm.

“Miha, I don’t know how to ever thank you. I thought I was in debt to you before for giving me closure about Mateo, but now this. My mother was stubborn. She wouldn’t let my father tell me. She said I was a busy man and she didn’t want to bother me.” His voice cracked as he struggled to finish

the sentence.

“She did what mothers do, Trino. They sacrifice for their children. Willingly. I’m fairly sure she would tell you she’d do it again, too.”

He laughed, trying to keep the tears that were threatening to fall from doing so. “It’s weird. My entire world is falling apart and I can’t stop thinking about how grateful I am that it happened so I could see her one last time.”

“Everything happens the way it’s supposed to, Trino. We might not be able to see it at the time, but there’s a reason for everything. It’s our job to figure out the reason. This one just happens to be obvious.”

Trino sighed. “Thank you, Miha. I still don’t know how you know everything you do, but I’m forever in your debt and I will always stay loyal to Jefe because of you.”

“You would’ve stayed loyal to him without me, Trino. I’m just extra incentive,” I said, laughing. I put my arm through his, walking us toward Aleksei. “Come on, you can add to the stories about me that they’re all telling. I’ll be your translator.”

Aleksei nodded to both of us. “Follow me,” he said in his thick Russian accent.

We wound our way through the house to a study at the opposite end of the house. “I’m never going to find my way out of here,” I said, mostly to myself as we walked into the room. Adrik’s eyes landed on me immediately when we walked into the room, almost like he was expecting us to walk in at that moment. Trino patted my hand that was still holding his arm, releasing my arm so I could go to Adrik.

“You have very impressive stories about you, sladkaya,” Vitaliy said in Russian, watching as Adrik pulled me next to him on the couch.

“Depends on your definition of impressive, I think,” I said, smiling at him. “But I did tell them I promised you glory. I hope they didn’t disappoint.”

Vitaliy laughed. “They did anything but.”

“Can we speak English for Trino? He has stories of my glory as well I don’t want to leave him out,” I said in English. Vitaliy laughed for the second time in as many minutes.

“Since you’re all here now, tell me what’s happening. I’ve heard little pieces here and there from some of my contacts I still keep in touch with, but I’m guessing it’s gotten much worse,” Vitaliy said.

We spent the next few hours filling in some of the details of everything that had happened since I met Adrik. Vitaliy was not surprised that Lorenzo and Salvadori were big players behind the coup. “You know I banished Lorenzo just as a “f**k you’ to Salvadori, right?” The disgust was apparent. “I don’t think I’ve ever met a more disgusting human than Salvadori.”

“Armando might actually get that title now,” Stephen said.

“Explain,” Vitaliy said, clearly curious. We hadn’t gone into explicit detail about Armando’s betrayal and Vitaliy didn’t know yet that Ivan and I were taken. When he heard all the details of what had happened, he was clearly angry, but surprisingly, it was somewhat directed at me. “You said you got hurt and couldn’t train. You never said anything about almost dying at the hands of Armando!” he said, his voice quite loud. Adrik’s hold on me got a little tighter. I could feel his anger, but I squeezed his leg to let him know I was okay.

I looked at Vitaliy, as calmly as I could, and said, “because I knew this would be your reaction and I preferred to have them closer to me when it happened.”

He opened his mouth to speak, but shut it without saying a word. I heard Adrik cough quietly and I knew he was trying not to laugh. I glanced at Ivan, who was also struggling not to laugh.

“She didn’t tell you how badly she was hurt either,” Trino said. “I saw her soon after. It was bad.”

“I mean, it wasn’t ideal, but I’m still here,” I said, shrugging my shoulders.

“And what of Armando?” Vitaliy asked.

“Oh, he’s wishing he took her advice, pretty much on a daily basis,” Ivan said.

“What advice?”

The guys all couldn’t hold in their laughter any longer. None of them could keep it together long enough to answer, so it fell to me to do so.

“There were a few minutes between when they got to the building and when they actually made it up to me and Ivan. Armando knew they were in the building and made a call to his security guys, who had already left and wouldn’t take his call. I might have told him his best option was to go to the roof and jump. Otherwise he was going to experience a very slow, painful death,” I said. “He didn’t take me up on the offer, so he almost died that day and a few times since that day.”

Adrik looked at his father. “I want him to suffer for what he did to her,” he said.

“As well you should. What was the end game of taking her? To get to you?” Vitaliy asked.

“That and they were trying to sell me. I still don’t know if it was Sal’s idea or Armando’s idea to do so, but Armando seemed to think I was going to solve a lot of his problems once I was sold. When he realized I wouldn’t fetch top dollar, that’s when he lost it and the beating began,” I said.

Vitally cursed under his breath. “By what standards did they decide that you wouldn’t get top dollar?”

I sighed. “I have scars covering my back, Vitaliy. Armando didn’t know about them. I keep them covered. My stomach and legs were also heavily bruised from when they grabbed me, and Ivan. They had to slam me into a parked car to subdue me. When he saw the bruises and the scars, he lost it. I might’ve also provoked his anger by being a shit. I have a problem controlling my mouth.”

“The scars. What are they from?” he asked. I could tell he was curious, but he was very serious, like he was already planning on destroying whatever it was that gave me the scars.

“Her uncle almost killed her, Ivan said, so I wouldn’t have to.

We watched as Vitaliy’s anger rose to the surface. “And what of him?” he asked. He was gripping the arms of his chair so hard that his knuckles were

white.

“I killed him.” I said.

My answer took Vitaliy by surprise. I heard Aleksei cursing behind me as well. Vitaliy thought for a moment, then said, “I see I was wrong to worry about you, sladkaya. You were made for this world.”

Misha snapped his fingers and pointed at me. “Called it.”

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 351

Adrik

As soon as Sephie and I were alone that evening, she went straight to the bathroom to take out the contacts she’d been wearing all day. This was the first day she’d had to wear them this long and they were starting to irritate her eyes. “It’s taken all my self-control not to scratch my eyes constantly for the past hour,” she said, on her way to the bathroom.

“You wore them a lot longer today than you ever have before. Maybe we need to put a time limit on them,” I said, following her. As soon as they were both out, she did rub her eyes for a moment. She walked to me, her sweet smile on her face. As she got closer, I could see her eyes had changed to deep blue. “I’ve actually missed that today,” I said. “Your eyes are gorgeous on a normal day, solnishko, but I find myself loving when they change.”

“I find myself loving you, my future husband,” she said. We hadn’t had a chance to discuss how I introduced her to my father and I could tell she’d been waiting to give me a hard time about it.

“I…” I stammered, running my hand through my hair.

She giggled. “You don’t need to justify it. I liked it. I just didn’t expect it,” she said as she pulled me down to kiss her. “I also didn’t expect you to be so nervous around your father. Is that normal or is that because you didn’t tell him I was coming too?”

Of course, she would have figured out I didn’t tell anyone she would be with us. “Sephie, I didn’t tell them because I just didn’t think about it. You’re always with me. Just like the guys are always with me.”

“Oh, I’m not mad about it. I thought it was hilarious how they all looked at you when they saw you being affectionate with me. It was like they weren’t sure you were the same Adrik they’ve known for years. I don’t think I would’ve seen that same reaction if you’d told them. But that doesn’t mean I still can’t give you shi t about it,” she said, grinning at me. I watched as her eyes went from blue to green. God, I love her.

“What did you and my father talk about when he kidnapped you?” I asked as I pulled her shirt off and started to unbutton her pants.

“A few things. You’re going to worry when I say this, but I don’t mean it in the way you think I do,” she said. She was helping to unbutton my shirt, likely to keep her hands busy as I could see her start to worry over how I was going to react. “You’re not as different from your father as you think you’

are.”

I slid my shirt off, thinking about what she just said, and watching her watch me. Her eyes were changing again, but it was like they couldn’t pick a color to stick to. “Okay, how do you mean it?” I said, holding my shirt out so she could slip into it.

She grinned at me as she put my shirt on. “When he shook my hand, you saw the reaction he had, didn’t you?” I nodded my head, remembering his surprise when he took her hand. “It’s because he can feel there’s something different about me. He knows there’s something different about you as well. He told me. The only way he could know there was something different about you and I is if there’s something different about him as well.”

I was quietly buttoning up my shirt on her as she talked, thinking about what she was telling me. I still couldn’t look away from her eyes, as they kept changing while she talked. “Did he tell you what was different about him?”

“No, but he said your mother knew I was coming. She also knew the guys were coming. When he told me that you and I were different, I felt compelled to tell him that it wasn’t just us. I didn’t get into specifics, but he said that I’d just made your mother a very happy woman. She used to tell him that you would find me and find others that are special like you and you’d be able to realize all the dreams your father had when he ran the city, plus some.” She put her hands on my chest while I wrapped my arms around her waist, holding her close to me. I was still loving being able to hold her against me completely now that she didn’t have her cast in the way. I had no idea how much I would miss the little things between us.

“She said that? Really?” I asked. “I don’t really remember my mother. She died when I was very young. I can barely remember what she looked like.”

“I know. He knows too. Your mother was for him what I am for you. That’s why he lost control of his anger. His control died with her. He told me he. worries that his anger became your anger. I told him yours was different than his, but didn’t go too much into details. He was very much lost in his memories when we talked. I think that’s the first time he’s allowed himself to think about your mother in a long time.”

“It’s definitely the first time he’s smiled in decades. And I’m not sure I’ve ever heard him laugh. I think that’s one of your superpowers. Getting grumpy men to laugh,” I said, holding her tighter while I grabbed her ticklish spot just above her hips, making her giggle and squirm in my arms.

“I don’t know how long you plan to stay down here, but I think it would be a good idea for you and your father to have a talk tomorrow. I can go with you, if you like. He seems to let his guard down around me. He also said he recognizes that you have a hard time seeing past his gruff exterior. Much like you and much like Ivan, it’s mostly an act. He’s a cheeseball in there.”

I laughed loudly. “I don’t think anyone has ever, or will ever, compare my father to cheese.”

“He’s like gruyere. Hard on the outside, soft, creamy, and maybe a little salty on the insic

I couldn’t stop laughing, which made her laugh with me. I picked her up, carrying her to the bed. “Now I’m going to struggle to not think about him as cheese when I talk to him

“You. Are. Welcome,” she said as she settled in across

my chest.

The following morning, we woke early to get a workout in before everyone else. My father still kept in shape, as did his security guys, so he had a gym in his house, much like the ones we were used to at home. Sephie still couldn’t workout like normal, but she was slowly making progress. Andrei was so patient with her and somehow expertly kept her temper under control when she would get frustrated at not being able to do much.

Her ribs would still bother her occasionally. Her lung was almost back to normal, but she would still sometimes struggle to catch her breath. Andrei saw it one time when she talked him into letting her do more. He also saw that it scared her again. Ivan and I immediately felt it, shielding her so Andrei couldn’t see her eyes change. I suspected he either knew they were changing already or that he would be the next one to figure it out.

After that happened, he made her go back to lighter exercises that wouldn’t tax her lungs so much, even though she protested. He gently, but very firmly told her to sh ut up. He was her trainer for a reason and that was that. I think she was impressed that he put her in her place so adeptly.

“Adrik

She’d reached the point now that she could do very light sparring with him, which made her happy. Her upper body was still weaker than normal and with her ribs still causing her pain, they concentrated on her legs. She was more powerful there anyway. As the rest of us were finishing up, she and Andrei were off to the side practicing drills. Since she had to go slow, he was working on her form and making it perfect.

My father and Aleksei walked into the gym, noticing Sephie and Andrei immediately. They nodded to us, but were watching her. Andrei gave her a break while they discussed something and he adjusted her form slightly. When she tried again, we could see the lightbulb moment she had. She practiced a few more times, then they had another sheat discussion. I could tell she was trying to talk him into letting her go faster. He would roll his eyes at her, disagreeing with whatever she was saying, but she kept at it until he finally relented. We all saw him tell her sternly, “one time.” He held up one finger to make sure she understood. She grinned, clapping her hands. He gave her instructions, she nodded her head, then he gave her the okay to begin.

After the ball, when she’d injured her hip, she lost some strength in her legs. It took her a while, but she gained it all back. This time, she lost strength in her upper body, but her legs were as strong as ever. Having to slow down and only being able to work on details was actually making her stronger and faster. Andrei was expecting each kick she delivered, but he still had to work to stay ahead of her to keep her from kicking him and not the pads.

My father had walked over to me while he watched her. “That’s how she trains when she’s hurt?” he asked.

I laughed, nodding my head. “We had her fight one of Armando’s security guys who had a problem with her having any kind of authority over him. We just wanted to knock him down a few pegs. She killed him,” I said, glancing at him. His eyes went wide. “Turns out he was working for Salvadori’s son, too. He was a plant. She knows things before anyone else most of the time.” I was curious to see how my father would react to hearing me say that out loud. After talking to Sephie about him the night before, I was feeling less nervous around him.

Ivan had walked closer, hearing our conversation. “When they tried to kidnap her the first time, she killed more guys than the rest of us did. She saved my life that day,” Ivan said. “It’s one of the reasons Salvadori hates her so much. She has a tendency to kill his guys. Frequently.” He laughed at the thought of Sal being pissed.

I watched as Vitaliy casually put his hand on Ivan’s shoulder as he responded. I could see the brief look of surprise when he touched him. I knew what he was doing. I think Ivan did too, as he saw it as well. “They all are. We just don’t know how Viktor and Stephen are yet. You don’t need to check,” 1 said, laughing at Vitaliy’s surprise that I had caught on to what he was doing. Sephie and Andrei had finished and were walking back toward us. She walked right to me, tucking herself into my side, smiling warmly at Vitaliy. She immediately caught on that something had just happened. She looked at me, searching my eyes. She laughed, looking at Vitaliy.

“You thought I was lying, didn’t you?” she asked, clearly amused at his guilty expression. He cursed under his breath. “We have much to discuss later, old man,” she said, pulling me toward the door. We heard the guys’ laughter as they followed us out of the gym.

A few hours later, Sephie, Vitaliy, and I went for a walk. She managed to talk everyone else into not following us this time, although it was more difficult than she thought it would be. She ended up having to compromise, promising that we would stay within sight. It made me smile to see how protective they were of her in new situations. Aleksei noticed too, asking me quietly, “are they always this protective of your girlfriends?”

“Never. She’s the only one. I didn’t ask them to be this way, either. Not after the first day. They worry about her almost as much as I do,” I said.

He was quiet for a moment. “I used to worry about your mother much the same way. That speaks to Sephie’s character.”

“Give her time, Aleksei. She’ll have you wrapped around her finger too,” I said. Sephie was done with her negotiations and on her way to me. Aleksei smiled at her, telling her Vitaliy would be out in a minute. Her heart-stopping smile stretched across her face.

“I don’t think she needs that much time,” he said before turning to leave.

Vitaliy walked outside shortly after, his hardened expression softening when he saw Sephie. I’d seen my father’s rough features soften very few times in my life, but it was obvious when he looked at her that he was completely defenseless against her. I was fairly certain that he would do anything she

asked of him.

She grabbed my hand, walking toward Vitally. “I’d very much like to walk with an old man, if you’re up for it,” she said.

He smiled down at her. “How could I refuse?” he asked, offering her his arm. She slid her arm through his, while still keeping a hold of my hand with her other arm.

“So happy I have two functioning arms right now,” she said, grinning up at me.

Once we walked far enough away from the house that we wouldn’t be overhead, she elbowed him in the ribs lightly. “I can’t believe you thought I was lying to you about the guys being like me and Adrik. Rude,” she said, trying not to laugh. Even though she had her contacts in, I knew her eyes were solid green right now, which made me smile to myself. I watched my father actually blush as she chastised him.

“Forgive me, sladkaya. It’s been so long that I have convinced myself it was all a fairy tale. I haven’t found anyone like Adrik until you. And I’ve known Ivan for years. He wasn’t like you when I knew him before. He’s changed,” he said.

“How did you know I was different?” Sephie asked him.

He walked in silence for a few steps. We could see him considering how to explain it. “It’s like a judgment system, if you will. When I touch someone, I can tell certain things about them,” he said.

“Whether they’re good or bad, you mean?” she asked.

“Yes, on a basic level. Most people are both, as I’m sure you know, but some are ruled by good and some are ruled by evil. I can tell the difference. Salvadori, for example, is ruled completely by evil. With you and Adrik, and now Ivan, it’s completely different. There’s an electricity there, almost. It feels like I can feel your power, if that makes sense,” he said.

“You should touch Misha and Andrei later. You’ll feel it with both of them, too. Viktor and Stephen also have something, we just don’t know what it is yet. They’re both timid about realizing it,” I said,

“Are they all like you, then?” he asked me.

“No, not even a little. We all complement each other though,” I said.

“How?”

“Misha started with being able to predict outcomes. Like a gut instinct. It’s now evolved into him being able to see things as they happen or before they happen. Sephie helped him with that. Andrei is like her,” I said.

“Like you how, sladkaya?” he asked her.

“I have a knack for reading people’s minds. Andrei just discovered he can do it too. He’s still a little insecure about it, but he’s getting better,” she said, smiling at him.

Vitaliy walked a few more steps, mulling over what we’d just told him. “Ivan feels very similar to you two. What does he do?”

Sephie chuckled. “That one is a little harder to explain, but he’s my protector.”

“He’s her shield,” I said. “I never told you, but Ivan is built different. He feels no pain. I could shoot him point blank and he wouldn’t feel it. It’s that ability that saved her life the first time they tried to kidnap her. It almost killed him, but she killed the guys coming after them so he could get them to safety before he collapsed. She also has a special ability to calm him. Ivan has a horrific past when it comes to doctors. He gets stuck in his memories anytime he goes to the hospital. It usually takes the rest of us to hold him down so that he doesn’t hurt anyone or himself and we’re having to fight him with everything we have, but she can do it on her own just by touching him and whispering to him. Viktor’s still jealous of it,” I said, laughing.

“Ivan was experimented on as a kid, wasn’t he? His inability to feel pain was a highly sought-after trait in Russia years ago,” he said.

“You know about the facility?” Sephie asked, clearly surprised.

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Chapter 353

Adrik

“Not specifically, but I know of its existence. I still have friends that are very high up in very strategic organizations. They’ve talked about it before,”

he said.

“Is it still going on?” she asked.

“No, not for at least ten years now. There was a kid that escaped one night. He must’ve killed 15 people to get out. They got nervous and sh ut the program down, thinking that he would come for them.”

“That was Ivan,” she said.

“Really?” Vitaliy asked, clearly surprised.

“Really. He told me all about it. If you can find the doctors that used to work there, I’ll happily ki ll them myself,” she said. I could feel her anger come to the surface as she thought about what was done to Ivan when he was younger.

Vitaliy put his opposite hand over her hand that was still holding his arm as we walked. He stopped and turned to both of us. “How do you control that?” he asked, completely shocked. I knew he was referring to her anger, but she was at a loss. It wasn’t at nuclear levels, so she likely hadn’t even

noticed.

“Control what?” she asked. She looked between us, trying to figure out what he was shocked about.

He took her hand once more. “Your anger. You feel like a raging inferno right now,” he said.

I chuckled. “This is nothing, which is why she’s confused as to what you’re talking about. She’s keeping it under wraps because of you. But I bet if we turn to look, Ivan will be worried about her. He can feel it too,” I said.

Vitaliy turned to look behind us. I could tell by his expression that Ivan had moved closer to us. I turned to look and sure enough, he was closer, ready for whatever she needed. She looked as well, signaling to him that she was okay. We could see him relax and return to the others.

“How?” Vitaliy asked.

“We’re not entirely sure. Adrik can feel everything I feel now and same for him. I feel everything he feels. Even when we’re apart, we can still feel each other. It’s partly why they found me and Ivan so quickly. When Ivan and I were taken, I started to be able to feel his anger, which is how it started with Adrik. Then I panicked one night and Ivan was able to feel that too. He isn’t able to feel everything yet, but I expect he will eventually. But all of them have an awareness of me, especially when it comes to protecting me. They don’t need to see me to know exactly where I am,” Sephie said.

“Ivan felt your fear the other night, solnishko. He said he would need to be admitted to an asylum if he felt things as strongly as you do,” I said.

“I agree with Ivan,” Vitaliy said.

She cut her eyes at both of us, shrugging her shoulders. “This is how I’ve always been. I don’t know any different.”

“What about the other two?” he asked.

“We’re not sure. They haven’t shown any signs that we know of yet, although Stephen is very adept at breaking people’s minds already. It wouldn’t surprise me if it had to do with that whenever it happens,” I said.

“That’s a useful skill to have,” Vitaliy said.

“I think they’re both closer to figuring it out, but there’s still something holding those two back,” Sephie said.

Vitaliy looked at her thoughtfully. “You know what it is on at least one of them, don’t you?”

“I have my suspicions but I try to hot pry in people’s heads without their permission. Stephen has a very dark spot in his past. I’m sure it has to do with whatever that is. Viktor is still mourning, even though he tries to pretend like he’s not,” she said.

“His wife, no?” he asked.

She nodded her head. “He’s still heartbroken. He hides it well, but he’s still working through that pain.”

“He will for a while. It’s not something you easily get over. I still have days where it feels like my heart is breaking open because I miss her so much,” he said, moving away so we wouldn’t see the tears in his eyes.

Sephie stepped toward him, placing her hand on his arm When he turned his head toward her slightly, she hugged him. I watched my father, who never showed any emotion other than anger, crumble in front of me. He clung to her like she was his lifeline. They stayed silent for several minutes, until finally his hold on her loosened. She stepped back slightly, but kept her hands on his shoulders. “You’ll find her again and you’ll get to fall in love with her all over again. She sacrificed this lifetime for Adrik, but the next will be the reward for that.” She was quiet for a moment, then she said, “you know she’s still around, right? You can still talk to her. She watches over you. She always has.” She glanced at me, then turned back to him. “She says she misses you too and that you’ll always be her luchik.”

He inhaled sharply, looking to me. “Did you tell her that?” he asked.

“Tell her what?”

“That’s what your mother used to call me,” he said.

“I didn’t know that. I can barely remember her.”

Sephie smiled sweetly at him, stepping away from him to me. “She told me, Vitaliy. Don’t ask me how. It’s never happened before and it might never happen again, but she just told me to tell you that.” Sephie was quiet for a second, then she laughed. “She might’ve also just told me to tell you that she was right and you should’ve listened to her.” Sephie looked up at me, grinning. “I like your mother. She’s fun.”

Vitaliy laughed. I’d seen him laugh more in the last two days than I’d ever seen him laugh in my entire life. He cursed under his breath, looking at Sephie with a look of wonderment in his eyes. “You would’ve loved her. You’re very similar. I’m surprised she didn’t have you yell at me for not knowing she was watching over me.”

“You weren’t ready to know, Vitaliy. Now you are. She can’t be mad at you for what you didn’t know,” she said.

He glanced between Sephie and I. “I admit that I did doubt your mother was right when she told me you would find the absolute perfect woman, but she was definitely right,” he said.

“That’s why she’s stuck with me,” I said, pulling her to me.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 354

Adrik

When we walked back to the house, the guys were all outside where they could see us, along with Trino and Aleksei. A couple of my father’s other security guys were there as well. My guys were visibly relieved when Sephie came back. Ivan looked at her, likely wanting to know what had made her anger show up earlier. He raised an eyebrow at her, silently asking what had happened. She walked to him, wrapping her arms around his waist. “Have I mentioned lately how adorable you are when you get all twitchy when you’re worried about me, Squish?” she said, kissing his cheek.

Aleksei laughed. “Squish?” He looked at Ivan. “You let her call you that?”

She looked at Ivan, stepping back slightly, worried that she’d made a mistake. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders tighter, keeping her there. “She’s the go ddamn princess. She can call me whatever she likes,” he said.

Sephie laughed, saying, “Ivan has had more nicknames than the rest of them, I think. Squish is just my favorite. Would you prefer I only called him Vanya? Is that it? You’re jealous because no one ever gave you a more creative nickname than Alyosha?”

Aleksei’s checks blushed. “My mother called me Alyosha.”

“It’s very Russian and it’s very traditional. I would expect nothing less. 1, however, am not so traditional and prefer the fun side of life, so I’m going to keep calling him Squish if you don’t mind. And even if you do, f**k off,” she said, smiling at him.

In 30 years, I’ve never heard my father laugh as loudly as he did when he heard Sephie put Aleksei in his place. Everyone was laughing, even Aleksei. Russian men, particularly older Russian men tended to be hardened and didn’t waste time on being overly polite. They understood frankness. They respected it. Much like with Ivan in her apartment kitchen, we all witnessed her earn Aleksei’s respect.

“Come, we will talk business while Alyosha licks his wounds,” Vitaliy said as he walked to the couches and tables on the patio outside the house. Ivan kept Sephie back for just a minute, having a quiet conversation with her. He still looked concerned, but whatever she said to him made him smile. She was still smiling when she turned to join me on the couch near my father. She happily climbed in my lap to free up more space on the couches for someone else. Ivan took advantage and sat next to us.

I glanced at him, making sure he was good from earlier. He leaned over saying, “checking on her contacts. I don’t know a few of these guys. We’re all still a little jumpy from Trino’s guys.”

I nodded once. “Good call,” I said as she looked back at both of us. “Adorable. And twitchy,” she said.

“I know Sal and Lorenzo orchestrated this coup attempt, but we didn’t get around to where they are now. And what of the other bosses? I know Armando is being held, but what of everyone else?” Vitaliy asked.

“Trino took care of Sal’s son, Anthony, as well as Lorenzo and Massimo,” I said.

“Vitally, I don’t know if you know about Trino’s flair for the dramatic, but it’s f**king impressive,” Sephie said..

“Explain,” my father said.

Sephie glanced at Trino, grinning at him. Trino looked at Vitaliy and said, “I like the theater. I wanted their deaths to make a statement.”

Vitaliy looked to Sephie for clarification. “He lit Massimo on fire and threw him off a cliff. Then he chopped off Anthony and Lorenzo’s heads and delivered them to Sal.”

Vitaliy looked at Trino, almost in admiration. “That is impressive,” he said.

Trino laughed. “We do things a little differently in South America. That’s tame compared to what I have planned next.”

“Where is Sal now?” Vitaliy asked.

“He fled to Italy a couple days after he got Anthony and Lorenzo on his doorstep. He had tunnels under his house that he used to escape. My guys

were watching him,” Trino said.

“He’s with Ricardo. We’re not completely sure, but we think Ricardo has been behind all of this, along with Lorenzo from the beginning,” Viktor said.

“Ricardo De Luca?” Vitaliy asked.

“You know him?” I asked.

“Da. He was close associates with Giovanni, before Armando took over for bith. They were in business together regularly. He pitched me a couple of ideas, but I never was interested. I never liked him, although he was never in the illegal side of things,” he said.

“We think he’s been behind Armando the entire time. Armando isn’t who he says he is. He’s from a poor family in Italy. His m om was a crack wh ore, even. Very different story from the one he’s been giving everyone else. Ricardo and Giovanni are related, but distantly. He’s the connection between Armando and Giovanni. He likely placed him with Giovanni in the hopes that he would take over from Giovanni and he could control him,” Ivan said.

“Ricardo has also been in business with Lorenzo for years. Once you banished Lorenzo to Sicily, he set up extensive networks throughout Europe. He’s been rebuilding his fortune over there with Ricardo’s help,” Viktor said.

“Why would Ricardo care about controlling Armando if he’s not part of that side of the business?” Vitaliy asked.

“That’s the question we can’t figure out. Either he is and we just haven’t found it yet or there’s another reason. Armando said he’s basically obsessed with Boss. Ricardo has been trying to beat him in business for years, but has never been able to. Boss always has a bigger project going than Ricardo and is always more successful,” Ivan said.

Vitally looked at me, nodding his head once. “This is why I turned the business over to you so early. I knew you wouldn’t f**k it up like the other bosses’ children.” I chuckled.

“Was Sal in the flesh trade when you were still running things?” Sephie asked Vitaliy

“If he was, I didn’t know about it. That’s abhorrent. I wouldn’t allow it,” he said.

“That’s how Lorenzo rebuilt his fortune in Sicily. Those are his networks throughout Europe. According to Dario, Sal has been in it for years, too. That’s what caused me to find Sephie. I went to their meeting because I’d heard about Sal’s son trying to bring it to the city,” I said.

“What happened at the meeting?” Vitaliy asked.

“Um, it got a little derailed,” Sephie said. She looked at Vitaliy, almost like she was going to be in trouble. She said, “see, I have this problem with my mo uth. I can’t not be a di ck sometimes. It tends to get me in trouble.”

He looked amused, as he asked again what happened. She sighed. “The bosses knew he was coming and that they were in trouble. It wasn’t just about Anthony. The other bosses had raised taxes so they were all in for it. Anthony was supposed to create a diversion, which involved me and was mostly successful, but nobody expected your son to react the way he did when Anthony used me as a distraction. It kind of set off a chain of events that night.”

“What did he do to you?” Vitaliy asked, clearly starting to get angry.

Sephie looked at the floor. I could feel the light shaking start in her legs. “First he smacked her a ss so hard that she fell over the table,” I said. “She quickly left the room, which gave me the opportunity to teach that kid some manners. Later, he caught her coming out of the kitchen and tried to touch her. She refused so he choked her.”

“Boss knew something was wrong when she hadn’t returned and neither had he. Anthony had her off the floor by her neck when we found him. Viktor and I took him outside and almost beat him to death that night. He didn’t like that,” Andrei said.

“Was this before or after he told you his name?” Vitaliy asked Sephie.

“After,” she said.

“I’m surprised you didn’t ki ll him, then,” he said, nonchalantly.

“At the time, I was more worried about her. And I still had an ounce of respect for Salvadori, although that was short lived,” I said.

“And what about your guy?” Vitaliy asked Trino.

Trino cursed in Spanish, disgusted at the thought of Martin. “That’s also Sal’s fault,” Sephie said. “Sal convinced Martin to help them overthrow Trino. He involved the Mexican cartels, too. Either Ricardo or Lorenzo or both decided to use the cartels as their army. They needed manpower and they knew it. Overthrowing Trino was the payment for the cartels helping them, but Ricardo knew there likely wouldn’t be enough of them left at the end of it all to worry about that. When Tino stayed loyal and wouldn’t negotiate, they changed their plan slightly. Somewhere along the way, they convinced Martin to help them overthrow Trino, with Sal’s goddaughter as payment.

“The same goddaughter that was sleeping with Armando when she first met Martin, let the record reflect,” Misha said. I wondered to myself if he would ever get over his hatred for her

“This is all connected nicely, I must say,” Vitaliy said.

Sephie snapped her fingers, pointing at him. “Same, Vitally. Same.” He laughed at her, shaking his head.

“It all points back to Salvadori. And apparently Ricardo,” he said. “I still have a few contacts in Italy. I’ll see what I can find out about Ricardo.”

“We have a way to get rid of him and make the people of the city think the mayor and police are actually doing something, but we also think the mayor is in Sal’s pocket. The police commissioner is not, but he can only do so much. The people are ready to revolt against the other bosses. They still love Boss though. They will stand with him if he gets rid of all the other bosses,” Ivan said.

“That’s your plan? Get rid of all the other bosses?” he asked me. I nodded my head. “What do you need from me?” he asked.

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King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 355

*Sephie

I could feel Adrik’s surprise when his father asked him what he needed. We had come to Panama for Trino, nothing more. I knew Adrik wasn’t planning on asking his father for help. In his mind, this was his problem and he was going to deal with it. His father, however, was more than willing to help his son finally realize the plans he could never materialize when he was in charge of the city.

“We might’ve just f**ked up part of their plans. We got Sal’s goddaughter out of the picture, so now Martin has no payment for whatever his part in this plan is. That just happened yesterday, so we’re waiting to see how he handles that when he finds out,” Ivan said.

“She was being held at my building. Martin’s plan was to get her away from the building and grab her. I’m taking it as a move against me since it’s my guys that are on her,” Adrik said.

“How do you know this?” Vitaliy asked.

“We have the messages between Martin and Giana to prove it. We’ve also overheard conversations between them,” I said. I caught Misha and Andrei looking at me. Both were clearly surprised I would tell him that. The exchange did not go unnoticed by Vitaliy.

Vitaliy looked at Trino. “What’s his relationship like with the Mexican cartels?”

“Not good. If it weren’t for Sephie, he’d be dead. He went to try and negotiate with them while I was still in the city. I enjoy making personal deliveries, Trino said, a sly smile creeping across his face.

Vitaliy was quiet for a minute, then he ordered all of his guys but Aleksei to leave. Once they had left, he looked at me, asking, “how?”

I glanced to Misha and Andrei, then looked at Ivan, asking them if they were okay with what I was about to say. They all nodded. Adrik whispered, “you can tell him.”

“It wasn’t actually me. It was Misha. Me and Andrei are just batteries for him.” I said. They weren’t aware yet that we’d already told Vitaliy about what they could do.

“Don’t let her lie to you. She plays a bigger role than she’ll admit to. She keeps the focus on her to protect them,” Ivan said.

Trino looked surprised. “It’s not just you, Miha?” I shook my head no. “You were right to make it appear that it was only you when I was there. My guys couldn’t have handled knowing it was more than just you. They would’ve killed me on the flight home.”

I felt Adrik and Ivan both starting to get angry. “I knew they had a bigger problem with me than you were letting on,” I said. “What about Gus and Oscar though?”

He laughed. “Oh, those two love you as much as I do. Your friend Chen has told them what you did for him and how awesome you are. They have to listen to me tell them how awesome you are. Then they both witness it firsthand. Literally every time they see you. Shit, you’re the reason Oscar got to blow up an extra building. For that reason alone, he’s always going to love you.”

“Good news for Gus and Oscar. They won’t mysteriously drop dead from a random bullet through their head,” Stephen said. He’s definitely still angry about this.

“Wait until they find out what happened with mi madre. You won’t ever have to worry about them,” Trino said.

“Her threat still stands. We’re also happy to add to it at any point,” Stephen said.

Misha had his faraway look. I knew he was checking the accuracy of Trino’s statement. “They won’t be a problem,” he said.

Vitaliy looked to Misha. “How long have you had this?”

“I can’t say for sure, really. it’s changed. It started with a gut instinct. I would know that a plan was going to go horribly wrong. It’s developed into me being able to see things as they happen for other people. But it can change, depending on decisions made or not made. It’s not an absolute,” Misha

- said.

“And she helped you?” Vitaliy asked. He was clearly curious how everything worked.

Misha nodded his head. “Boss called her the Game Master. She shows you your potential when you’re ready. She also helps make everything clear for me. I can see more when she helps.” Misha looked at Trino. “It happened the night the Mexicans tried to kill you. When you didn’t answer when Boss called, Sephie knew something was wrong. I was checking to see what I could find and she grabbed my hand. That’s when we saw you under attack. We could see the way out, but knew you needed a diversion. That’s when Sephe made the kitchen blow up so you could get out.”

Trino laughed. “I knew there was no logical explanation for that kitchen to blow the way it did. You know the entire house blew once we were out, right?”

“What? I made sure you had plenty of time to get away,” said. I still had a hard time believing I was the one that made those explosions happen, but now was not the time to argue that point.

Trino cursed in Spanish, which always made me laugh. “Now I understand you telling my guy that you saved his life.”

Vitaliy, now curious, looked to Andrei. “And what of you?”

Andrei, who still wasn’t completely comfortable with his newfound ability looked a bit like a deer in the headlights when Vitaliy wanted to know what he could do. I couldn’t help but laugh. “Bubba’s like me. He can pick up on things people need said, but won’t. He notices more than most people do,

too.”

“And how long have you had this?” Vitaliy asked.

“Not very long at all. It just started happening. I’m still not very good at it,” Andrei said.

“You’re very good at it, Bubba. You just don’t trust yourself and you have a bad habit of comparing yourself to me, who’s been doing it much longer,” I

said.

“Andrei has a really good track record so far. He’s also my backup for when Sephie doesn’t want to tell me things because she thinks she’s bothering me,” Adrik said, holding me a little tighter.

“That’s a very good skill to have. Women can be…complicated,” Vitaliy said, giving me a sly smirk as I squinted my eyes at him. Adrik laughed quietly at our exchange. “You have a unique advantage that I never had when I was in charge of the city. Your mother was right. You’re going to realize everything I couldn’t,” he said, looking at Adrik.

“I still haven’t figured out how it’s all going to work. I just know that with Sephie and these five, it’s definitely possible. I’m not going to stop until all the bosses are dead,” Adrik said.

“Save Dario,” I said.

“Why him?” Vitaliy asked.

“His brain is completely broken. He wants out. He wants to disappear. He’s given us very useful information. I told him I’d let him go once this is over and the other bosses are taken care of,” Adrik said.

“And what’s your opinion of that plan?” Vitaliy asked me.

“I agree. Dario has been mentally tortured by Massimo and Sal for his entire life. He’s completely lost his entire family because of them. He has nothing. He wants nothing, except to be left alone. There’s an overwhelming sadness to that man because of everything he’s been through,” I said.

“I always suspected that Massimo was really the one in control between those two. They always made it seem like Dario was in charge, but no one could ever prove it was Massimo,” Vitaliy said.

“Sephie did,” Ivan said.

Vitaliy looked surprised, yet again. “How?”

“She speaks Italian, too, but the basses never caught on that she could understand their conversations. She said when the bosses would meet at the restaurant she used to work at, occasionally Massimo and Dario would stay after to have their own meeting after everyone else left. She would hang around and listen because they never considered her anything above a servant. Since they were speaking Italian in front of her, they also spoke very freely. Sophie knows where Massimo buried all the bodies, literally and figuratively,” Ivan said.

“You speak Italian?” Vitaliy asked.

1 responded, in Italian, telling him that I did understand it better than I spoke it, but he likely wouldn’t know the difference. It was his turn to surprise me when he responded in Italian, telling me that I spoke it just fine and that he could, in fact, tell the difference. I felt my cheeks blush as he caught me being a shit. He laughed loudly.

“One reason I handed everything over to my son when I did was so that I wouldn’t need to learn Spanish as well. The Colombians and the Mexicans were not big players yet when I was running the city. Now, they are. It’s beneficial to know what your associates are saying about you,” Vitaliy said in English.

“Guess I’m learning Spanish now, too,” I said, laughing

Trino laughed, “I know a guy.”

“And what of the dealers in the city? Where do their allegiances lie?” Vitaliy asked.

“All my dealers are loyal to Jefe and will remain so if they wish to keep existing,” Trino said.

“The rest of the dealers are also loyal to him. They helped us stop the brawn operation. They were ready to revolt against the bosses before we stepped in and told them our plan to stop it,” Ivan said.

“This drug. It seems ridiculous. Why would you want to kill your customers so easily?” Vitaliy asked.

“That’s a solid question. The story has always been that the dealers are the ones that created the drug and the bosses are the ones that stopped them from selling it. In reality, the opposite is true,” Viktor said.

“It’s another black mark against Sal,” I said. “He employed that son of a bitch doctor to make it and he’s the one that tried to force his dealers to keep selling it. It almost caused a war between the dealers and bosses when it was around the first time. The dealers were a big reason the second edition didn’t go anywhere.”

“They made another version?” Aleksei asked.

“They revamped it, trying to increase the aggression. That was the original plan to get Anthony and Lorenzo back to the city. Create extreme chaos. and they’d be able to slip in unnoticed,” Ivan said.

“Unfortunately for them, we found out about it and were able to stop it,” Stephen said.

“Jefe likes to stay one step ahead of the other bosses,” Trino said, nodding toward Adrik.

Vitaliy was quiet for a few moments, clearly contemplating everything we’d just told him. He sighed, then looked to Adrik. “You still don’t have very many contacts in Italy, do you?”

Adrik chuckled, but shook his head no. “To be fair, I haven’t needed them until now.”

“You will use mine, then,” Vitaliy said, matter-of-factly. “It will be easier now that you have sladkaya. None of them speak very good English and they’re too stubborn to learn Russian.”

“I mean, no pressure,” I said.

Aleksei laughed. “Italian men are suckers for beautiful women. You’ll be fine.”

Vitaliy also couldn’t help but laugh. “Alyosha is right. You need not worry, sladkaya.”

Chapter 356

Sephie

That night, once Adrik and I were alone in our bedroom, he was working to undo my pants as I was trying to quickly get my contacts out of my eyes. They were helpful and kept me from worrying about anyone seeing something they shouldn't, but I was finding that I didn't like wearing them for long periods. They made my eyes itch.

I was giggling at him trying to get my pants off while I was distracted. "You're going to make me drop one of these things and then I'm screwed," 1 said, trying to hurry and be careful at the same time.

"I'll have them make you extras when we get home," he said as he knelt down to slide my pants down my legs. "At least we know you won't need to worry about my father seeing anything. It'll probably make him love you even more. Aleksei, too. He was surprisingly okay with our conversation this

afternoon."

1 laughed. "I think your father has been waiting a very long time to have that conversation." I pulled the second contact out and put it in the container. I turned around to face Adrik, rubbing my eyes. He took advantage of my hands being busy and picked me up, setting me on the bathroom

counter.

"I think my father is just as in love with you as the rest of us," he said. His hands were roaming over my body as he waited for me to stop rubbing my eyes so he could pull my shirt off.

"Told you. He's a cheeseball in there," I said, laughing. When I pulled my hands from my eyes, he quickly pulled my shirt over my head and then his lips were on mine.

"Enough talking," he said, smiling against my lips. He wrapped his arms around me, pulling me closer to him. I wrapped my legs around his waist, pulling him closer to me as he su cked my bottom lip into his mo uth, biting down on it gently. It caused me to inhale sharply, my desire for him coming on strongly. I pushed my hips into him, feeling that he was completely aroused already. His warm hands made quick work of my bra, throwing it over his shoulder. He placed his hands over each breast, gently squeezing as he deepened the kiss. I moaned quietly in his mo uth, loving the trail of fire that spread over my body when he touched me.

His hands moved down to my hips, pulling me even closer to him. I smiled as he ripped my panties off. "That's why I brought extras," I said, laughing. He was smiling as he kissed down the side of my neck. My breaths were quicker as he teased all my favorite spots with his mo uth. I was so completely lost in what he was doing that he was still completely clothed. I momentarily snapped out of my euphoria and started to unbutton his shirt, but he stopped me.

"I won't be able to control myself if you take my clothes off and I want to take my time," he said, his voice husky with desire. As he said it, his lips were against my neck, his teeth grazing my skin lightly. I could feel his stubble against my skin, loving the contrast between the softness of his lips. and the roughness of his facial hair. A small moan escaped my lips as I felt him push all of his desire to me.

He knew that I struggled to control myself when he pushed his desire onto me. It was so overwhelming that it almost consumed me. I made an attempt once more to get his shirt off, but he took both hands in his. "I will hold you down if I have to," he said firmly, his lips right by my ear. His words were an unexpected turn on. My hips pressed into him involuntarily as my need for him grew. He looked at me for a moment. I recognized the look that meant my eyes were changing. He let go of my hands, his warm hands once again leaving a trail of fire everywhere they touched.

One hand went to the back of my neck, pulling me to him. His lips found mine once again as his other hand moved between my legs. As soon as I felt his fingers in my wetness, I moaned. His touch was light, at first. Too light. I wanted more. His fingers worked slowly, exploring my pu ssy. I pushed my hips into him, trying to get more pressure, more friction. He groaned into my mo uth. "You're always so eager," he said, quietly. He pulled back slightly so he could look at me, his s*xy smirk on his face. He knew he was driving me crazy. He was clearly enjoying it.

Just as I was about to say something, he pushed two fingers inside me roughly. Instead of words coming out of my mo uth, I moaned loudly. He chuckled as he leaned in and kissed my neck again. He pulled his fingers out and went back to exploring lightly. He stopped briefly, putting his hands on my hips. He pulled me to the edge of the counter, his hands holding my thighs that were still wrapped around him. He put his hand in between my breasts and pushed me back lightly before pressing my knees up toward my shoulders.

He knelt down in front of me, putting my feet on his shoulders. I had to lean back on my arms to keep from falling against the mirror. He kissed my inner thighs, taking his time, clearly still enjoying my torture. I felt his warm breath as his tongue started to explore where his fingers had previously been. His lips wrapped around my cl*t, su cking lightly. I ran my hand through his hair as he worked his tongue back and forth. I could feel myself starting to slowly build, but I still needed more. I grabbed his hair in my fist, trying to push his head toward me. He understood, increasing the

pressure. I felt him slide his fingers inside me once more, curling upward, as his tongue continued to work over my cl*t.

My breaths were coming quick, moans escaping as he pushed me closer to the edge. Each time I moaned, he increased the pressure of both his tongue and his fingers until I finally couldn't take anymore and crashed over the edge. His fingers didn't stop as I rode out my o*gasm. He stood up, his lips crashing into mine.

He didn't stop me when my hands went to unbutton his shirt. I worked feverishly to get it off, along with his pants. His fingers were still inside me, pushing me toward another o*gasm. He only briefly stopped to let his shirt fall to the floor before slamming back into me. I was close enough to another o*gasm that all I could do was hold on to his shoulders as his fingers f**ked me. When he felt my o*gasm start, he put his hands on my hips. and slammed into me with his co ck instead of his fingers. It was exactly what I needed. I was trying not to scream as he slammed into me repeatedly, pulling my hips toward him each time he thrust into me.

I grabbed his neck, kissing him to help m*ffle my loud cries of pleasure. I was breathing so hard at this point that I had to break the kiss as he was unrelenting in his rhythm. I felt his lips on my neck, then I felt his teeth as he bit down a little harder than usual. It sent waves of pleasure throughout my body. Much like I couldn't control myself when he pushed his desire onto me, he struggled to control himself when I pushed my pleasure onto him when I was having an o*gasm. He was learning to get a handle on it, but only sometimes. Because he spent so long teasing me this time, my o*gasm was especially intense so I decided to return the favor and shared it all with him. I'd learned that I could regulate how much I shared with him, to help him learn to control it. I didn't hold back this time. Turnabout is fair play, after all.

I heard him groan. "F**k, Sephie," he said as he increased the intensity even more. His thrusts came harder and faster. I knew he was feeling everything I was. I also knew he wouldn't be able to last much longer. I wrapped my legs around him tighter, the walls of my pu ssy clamping down on him as he kept drilling into me. He grabbed me roughly, his fingers digging into my hips. I loved when he lost control. I loved being able to make him lose control. I felt another o*gasm start before the previous one was completely done. His grip got tighter, his thrusts harder and I finally felt him explode inside me as I was coming down.

He grabbed my face in both hands, kissing me roughly. Both of us trying to catch our breath. He picked me up off the counter and walked us both to the shower. We were both sweaty. "At least I won't feel bad about sk*pping cardio tomorrow," he said as he turned the water on. His arms kept a hold of me, not wanting to let go just yet. He stood to the side of the water stream until it warmed up. His hands roaming over my back, his lips on mine. I' was happy to stay in his arms for as long as he wanted to keep me there.

Chapter 357

Adrik

I woke sometime in the middle of the night. Sephie was laying across my chest. She'd tried her best to wear me out before we finally went to sleep, but my brain just didn't want to stop. I don't know why I was so surprised that my father was so different with Sephie. I'd never seen him act the way he did around her. It was a welcome change.

My father had always been a cold man. He made sure I had everything I petded, but there was never any warmth between us. As I was growing up, I eventually came to realize that I was a reminder of my mother for him. I think it caused him pain to see me and have to constantly remember that he'd lost her. Now that I have Sephie, I can understand the pain he was in. If my mother was even half of what Sephie is for me, I'm impressed my father didn't lose his sanity when she died.

I inhaled deeply, lost in my thoughts. I felt Sephie snuggle into me more, effectively breaking me out of my head for a moment. I watched her sleeping peacefully on my chest, her fingers playing their song on my heart.

She'd been able to hide her eyes from everyone but Ivan so far, although I suspected that Andrei had at least a small clue that something had changed. It was only a matter of time before the others picked up on the fact that her demon eyes hadn't made an appearance in a while. I was fairly sure they'd already noticed. They just weren't saying anything yet. I knew we were eventually going to have to tell them, but I was enjoying having this secret with her for a little longer. I also didn't want her to have to wear the contacts anymore than she absolutely had to, since they seemed to make her eyes itch after wearing them for long periods.

I felt her stir and she picked her head up off my chest, resting her chin on me so she could look at me. She smiled sweetly at me. The moonlight coming in through the window made her porcelain skin look almost like it was glowing. "Wanna tell me about it?" she asked. Of course she knew I was lost in my head.

I smiled back at her, my hand lightly running over the features of her face. She closed her eyes, still smiling at me, enjoying my touch. "I didn't mean to wake you," I said quietly.

"I could feel you," she said. "You're all over the place."

I laughed. "Accurate."

She stretched beside me, then moved so she was straddling me. I sat up a little more so I could easily look at her. Even though my mind was everywhere all at once, seeing her climb on top of me while still na ked did not hurt..

She laughed when she saw where my mind immediately went. She just picked my hands up and placed them on her breasts. "Nobody likes cold boobies. They were extra warm from being on you. Now they're going to freeze," she said.

"And now I've suddenly forgotten everything I was thinking about," I said, squeezing her breasts as she laughed at me.

She put her hands on my chest, her eyes searching mine. Even in almost complete darkness, she could read my mind. She looked at me, a puzzled look on her face. "You seem happy about seeing your father this time. Why is it keeping you up?"

I moved one hand to the side of her face. I was actually trying to get her to close her eyes so she'd stop searching. I didn't want to deny her, but I also didn't think she'd want to have this conversation right now. I knew she was going to chastise me for it, too. She did close her eyes as she leaned into my hand. My thumb rubbing lightly against her cheek.

"You're not going to distract me, although I appreciate the effort," she said. A sly smile creeping over her face. She sighed, then said, "you have a better understanding of why your father is the way he is now that you have me." When I didn't answer immediately, she opened her eyes. "And now you're even more worried about losing me."

She was quiet for a moment. She chewed on her bottom lip as she was trying to find the words to say. "I sometimes forget, with everything that's happened, how hard all of this has been on you. You're almost as good as me at hiding things." She smiled sweetly at me, her fingers reaching out to run lightly aver my face through my stubble. She thought for a few minutes, then sighed. "I think everything was supposed to happen the way it did. You would've kept sending me away to try and protect me, thinking that you brought this danger to me if Armando and Sal hadn't grabbed me and Ivan. I never told you, but when we were at the warehouse and you told Ivan to get me out of there, I had a bad feeling. A very bad feeling, but it all happened so quickly that I couldn't say anything. I knew then that being apart from you was wrong, without really knowing it. You did what you thought was best, but it's still coming from an insecure place within you because there's still a tiny part of you that doesn't believe I love all of you."

"Was," I said. She raised an eyebrow, silently asking for more of an explanation. "There was a small part of me that didn't believe you loved all of me. That went away when we got to you and Ivan. Even though I knew you were in excruciating pain, I knew you could feel my anger. It was completely out of control at that point, but I could feel that you wanted it to be so. When I walked to you to put my jacket around you, I could see how much you. craved my anger at that moment. I could also see how much you loved me, despite my demon being fully on display. I'd always tried to keep that part of me away from you, worried that it would scare you. But you never backed down. You never looked at me differently. You only loved me more."

"I know who you are, Adrik. I've always known who you are. I've always known that side of you exists. You don't get to be the Lord King Boss without it." I chuckled at her title for me. "You still have the biggest heart of anyone I know. You all do. You're all worried that you're monsters. I worry that I'm a monster sometimes too. I don't have a pristine track record either, but you still love me in spite of it. And I still love you. All of you. Forever and always. So when you're worried that you're a monster and you can't see that even your demon has a good purpose or find any of your own love to give that side of you, you can borrow some of my love. I've got plenty. With your name on it." She grinned at me. I could feel the warmth spread through my body that meant she was thinking about how much she loved me. Even though I couldn't see them clearly, I knew her eyes had turned completely

blue as well.

She squealed as I grabbed her and quickly threw her down on the bed, moving so I was on top of her. I leaned down, kissing her softly. My hand on her cheek, my thumb rubbing lightly. I felt her desire for me come on very strongly. I knew that my gentle kisses made her melt every single time. She surprised me by grabbing my co ck and positioning me against her pu ssy. She moaned softly as I slid inside her. I would never tire of showing her just how much I loved her.

I heard her inhale sharply as I slid all the way inside her. It still happened every time and I still couldn't get enough of it. She angled her hips so she could take every bit of me. She exhaled, arching her back as I felt her pu ssy squeeze around me. I slowly starting to move inside her, loving the sound of her quiet moans as she felt the friction start to increase.

She wrapped her legs around my waist and tried to roll us both over. She ended up giggling when she couldn't do it, which made her pu ssy vibrate and clench around me. I grabbed her and pulled her on top of me, sitting up at first because I loved being able to look at her eyes. She kissed me deeply as she rocked her hips against me, but she placed her hands on my chest and pushed me back so I was lying down.

The moon was full enough that it gave just enough light through the windows that I could see her. She grabbed my hands, placing them on her breasts and moving them over her body as she arched her back and started to ride me. I loved watching her get lost in the feeling and loved it even more when she took charge.

She took one of my hands and placed my thumb over her clit, her fingers on top of mine, directing me to touch her exactly how she wanted. I could feel her orgasm building. I could feel everything she felt. Her rhythm increased, her hips grinding into me as she kept building to release. I moved my hand from between her legs and put hers in place of it. I wanted to watch her touch herself. I saw a small smirk as she knew what I wanted. She did not disappoint.

Keeping one hand in between her legs, she ran her other hand over her body. She cupped her full breast, wrapping her fingers around her nipple and squeezing. It sent a pulse of electricity through her body that I felt, making my hips je rk upward. She moaned loudly as she quickened her pace, riding me harder. Her breasts now bouncing with her movements, her breaths coming heavy and quick. I grabbed her hips, helping push her down on me harder. It was her undoing. Her entire body exploded into pure bliss around me.

In one swift motion, I flipped us so she was on her back once more. Trying to keep her orgasm going and unable to control myself any longer, I drilled hard into her. She grabbed my shoulders, her nails scraping over my flesh as she tried to hold on. Her lips were next to my ear, breathlessly saying my name as she urged me to keep going. Whatever she wanted, she could have.

Her arms fell limp to the bed as she gave in completely to her pleasure. All I could hear were her loud cries of pleasure. I felt her push everything she was feeling to me as we both exploded into pure bliss. Every cell in my body was on fire in the best way possible. Her touch sent chills down my spine. I never wanted it to end.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 358

Sephle

Adrik and I were the last ones to breakfast the following morning. Everyone gave us knowing looks and I suddenly worried that I'd been too loud the night before. Adrik felt my sudden panic. He slid his arm around my waist, his lips next to my ear. "Nobody heard you. But if they did, they're just jealous." He was clearly amused at the possibility of them hearing me. It was an ego boost for him. It was insanely embarrassing for me.

"Good morning, princess," Ivan said. I was fairly certain he felt my momentary panic as well. He was becoming quite good at feeling as much from me as I could feel from him. "We made bets as to whether you would wake up late today or not. You're due for a late morning."

"Sh ut up."

"No, it's true, gazelle. It's been a few weeks since you've slept in. I think you're past due, actually," Misha said.

I couldn't hide my amusement at them apparently knowing my schedules better than I did. "I had no idea I was so predictable," I said, sitting in an empty chair beside Viktor. He put his giant arm around my shoulders, hugging me sweetly. He kissed the top of my head, saying, "you're allowed to sleep in whenever you like. You waste a lot of energy taking care of all of us, sestrichka."

"I would not call that a waste, Papa Bear."

"I, for one, am relieved that you didn't sleep in this morning, spider monkey. I was going to feel bad about letting you go full speed yesterday morning if you had," Andrei said.

1 laughed, but before I could respond, Aleksei looked at me, half-confused, half amused. "Do they all call you different names?" I smiled at him, nodding my head. "I assume there's a reason for such strange names?" he asked, wanting further explanation. Clearly, Alyosha was jealous at our imaginative nicknames.

"There's a story for all of them," Misha said. Both Aleksei and Vitaliy looked at all of us curiously, wanting to hear why they called me by the names they did.

"The first day I stayed with her while Boss was working, she jumped on my back so I had to carry her around every chance she got. She still does it. That's why I call her spider monkey," Andrei said as he smiled and winked at me. I knew he'd come to love carrying me around as much as I did. Half the time, he'd offer first.

"She likes to go for runs and since I'm the only one that runs on a regular basis, I was forced to go with her. She almost killed me that first time. She's like a gazelle. I like to remind her that she almost killed me as often as I can," Misha said, his wide smile stretching across his face.

Ivan laughed. "Much like she put you in your place yesterday, Alyosha, she put me in mine very quickly after first meeting her. I had called her princess to try and pi ss her off. I was giving her shi t while she was trying to help me. She adopted it right then and she's been the princess ever

since."

"Why would you try to pi ss her off?" Vitaliy asked.

Before Ivan could answer, I said, "Ivan has a very special set of skills that he enjoyed using on your son's past girlfriends."

"How so?"

"His demons pull their demons out for the world to see, so everyone else can see the person as Ivan sees them. He just didn't realize that I have many of the same demons he does and I'm very good friends with them, so it didn't work on me." I laughed, remembering that morning in my kitchen. "He'd been hurt and needed stitches. It was before I knew of his aversion to doctors. I was offering to clean him up and trying to talk him into going to the hospital but he was giving me shi t. I gave him shi t back so he let me clean his wound, but I told him he needed stitches. He said he wasn't going to the doctor and then taunted me about stitching him up. He didn't know that I really could stitch him up, so I told him I was going to enjoy the pain it would cause since I had nothing to numb the area. I also didn't know that was not a thing that happens with him. I was just trying to pi ss him off the same way he was trying to pi ss me off, honestly."

"It was the first time we'd seen Ivan laugh in years when she told him she wished she had a lollipop to give him and thanked him for not killing this princess when she was done," Viktor said, his arm moving around my shoulders once again.

Stephen laughed loudly. "I didn't know about the lollipop comment. I would've paid to have seen his face."

Vitally and Aleksei were also laughing. "You really have nothing to worry about when it comes to my contacts in Italy, sladkaya. You'll be able to handle them just fine," Vitaliy said, still laughing. He was quiet for a moment, looking at all of us thoughtfully. Then he said, "the more I learn, the more impressed I am." Then he stood up and walked away from the table, leaving everyone slightly stunned at his words. I glanced to Adrik, who was more stunned than anyone, his mo uth slightly open, his eyes wide.

It was Aleksei that broke the stunned silence. He looked at Adrik, "she offers him a sweet reminder of things long lost to him. This was the father were too young to remember." He placed his hand on Adrik's shoulder as he, too, got up to walk away from the table, once again leaving us all in

silence.

you

"Jesus I haven't seen this kind of melodrama since Vlad first came to power," Stephen said, completely straight-faced. We all erupted into laughter, which inevitably grew as we looked at Trino's confused expression.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 359

“Adrik

My father called his contacts in Italy that afternoon. He requested Sephie’s presence, so that he could introduce her. I knew his contacts and they knew me, but because of the language barrier, I never had much contact with them. I had never had a real need for them until now.

“I’m going to call Battista. He’s the most useful. If he can’t get anything for you, I’ll call one of the other ones,” Vitaliy said. He looked at Sephie with a mischievous glint in his eye and said something to her in Italian. She laughed, but she looked almost nervous when she glanced at me. As my father looked away to make the call, I searched her eyes, trying to find out what he’d just said to her.

She was still much better at reading my mind than I was at reading hers, but the more I tried it with her, the easier it got. I found my answer before Battista answered the call. Vitaliy had told her that Battista was a notorious womanizer and would openly flirt with her in front of me, especially since he knew I didn’t speak Italian. I never worried about Sephie around anyone else, but that didn’t mean I wanted to see anyone else flirting with her. She smiled sweetly at me, noticing my clenched jaw. She pulled my arms around her waist as Vitaliy told Battista the reason for his call.

Battista knew of Ricardo, but said that he never liked him. Apparently, Ricardo had a bit of a reputation in the business world in Italy. He’d screwed a few too many people over early on in his career, so there were quite a few very influential people that refused to work with him. Battista was one of those people.

Battista was so wealthy that most people didn’t know he existed. Much like me, much like Vitaliy, he worked hard to be as anonymous as possible. But Battista also had generational wealth behind him. That plus the success he’d had in business gave him the opportunity to be a very powerful, very influential person. Instead, he chose to remain behind the scenes, choosing a quieter life. He had extensive networks throughout Italy and he kept a finger on the pulse of literally everything that happened in the entire country, but he stayed in the shadows. Only stepping in when absolutely necessary.

Most of my father’s contacts throughout the world were much the same. They were all very influential people that no one knew about. Just the few people in my father’s network alone made up well over half the world’s total wealth. And the common citizen didn’t even know they existed.

Battista was happy to help us out, especially if it meant Ricardo was going down. Sephie laughed at one particularly impassioned rant from Battista. She quietly said, “he’s almost as imaginative as Giana is about the insults for Ricarda.”

Vitaliy and Battista talked for a few more minutes, then I heard Vitaliy say Massimo’s name, followed soon after by Sephie’s name. She looked to me, somewhat surprised, then looked back at Vitaliy. He looked proud as he kept talking to Battista. Battista asked a question, to which Sephie answered. It was difficult to tell, but I think Battista was shocked at her answer. He was laughing at the end of it, which made Sephie laugh as well.

Once the call ended, Vitaliy said, “he’s going to see what he can find out about Sal and Ricardo. He’ll be able to find information on Niko and Vito too, if they’re still there. Battista has the most connections in Italy. He’ll be able to find the most information, but he’ll likely want to deliver it in person. That means he needs to come to the city or you need to go to Italy.”

“I won’t go to Italy if Sal and Ricardo are still there. Not until Sephie is completely healed. I won’t put her in danger again,” I said, firmly.

Vitally put his hand up, like he was trying to calm me down. “You won’t need to. He’ll come to the city if I agree to meet him there. He still owes me a very large debt. He’ll come to the city if it means paying that back.”

I felt Sephie’s hand timidly in mine. “I can travel. I’ll be okay. We can go there if we have to,” she said, quietly.

Before I could answer, Vitaliy said emphatically, “no. He’s right. No one is putting you in danger. Sal clearly has it out for you. And that was before he lost his son and his brother. Even though it was Trino that killed them, he’ll likely find a way to blame it on you just to have another reason to come after you.”

“Da mmit. Scolded,” she said, under her breath.

“No one is going anywhere right away anyway. It takes time to collect information. He’ll need a few days, at the very least,” Vitaliy said, taking a softer tone with her. He looked at me. “What are your plans with Trino? He’s going to stay in the city for now, no?”

“For now, yes. His entire security team is compromised. We need to get him a new team before he can go back to Colombia. The Mexicans are after him, as well. It’s just as big of a mess down there as it is in the city,” I said.

“His security is compromised because of sladkaya?”

“Totally accountable,” Sephie said, raising one hand.

Vitaliy scoffed. They were never loyal to him in the first place, then.”

I laughed, which made him look at me. “She said the very same thing to Trino when we found out.”

“Smart girl,” he said, winking at her.

“I think it’s time we go back to the city. It’ll take time to get a new security team for Trino. He has very loyal dealers, but I’m not sure they’re adequate enough for the security he needs. Viktor can help him with it, but they need to be in the city for that to happen. I also feel safer with Sephie at my building.” I said. “You’re always welcome. We have room for you and your guys at the building, although it won’t be as warm as it is here right.

now.”

Vitally looked lost in thought for a few moments. “I haven’t been to the city in years. Maybe it’s time I paid a visit.”

“Aleksei will be happy. He can go to that restaurant he’s been missing.” Sephie said.

Vitaliy laughed. “It’s not the food he misses at that restaurant, sladkaya. It’s the waitress. She’s likely not working there any longer.”

“That dog,” Sephie said quietly, shaking her head and laughing quietly.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 360

Sephie

We had made plans to return to the city the following morning. Vitaliy had agreed to come back with us, but he was going to come up a couple days behind us. He said he needed to take care of a few things in Panama before leaving.

I had quietly snuck off to the bedroom to take my contacts out for a few minutes. I told Adrik where I was going and what I was doing, so he wouldn't worry about me. I knew he was going to worry about me anyway. I didn't want to interrupt his conversation, but my eyes were itching so bad that I couldn't take it. I needed some relief for at least a few minutes. Contacts were highly overrated.

I sat down on the end of the bed, rubbing my eyes, finally getting some relief. I felt a slight breeze, so I opened my eyes. I didn't remember a door or window being open. When I looked up, there was a woman standing in front of me. At first, I was startled, but she looked familiar somehow. She smiled sweetly at me, then asked, "you can see me?"

I nodded my head, wondering why she would ask that question as I could see her standing plain as day in front of me. She caught on to my confusion. "You're the only one who's been able to see me. Or hear me. You really are special," she said.

I gasped. "You're Vitaliy's wife. Adrik's mother. You're Lena. How can I see you right now?" Her smile widened. She took a step closer to me and I saw her eyes. The same eyes that I adored on her son. "This has never happened before," I said, completely taken aback.

"I wanted to thank you," she said. "I keep an eye on Vitaliy, but I don't always stay with him. I have other responsibilities. That's how I met your father. He told me I could make this happen."

"He always talks to me in my dreams. Never when I'm awake. Except that one time when he swooped in, but even then, I didn't see him. Did he show you his swooping?" I asked, grinning at her.

She laughed. "You're very much like him." She walked closer to me, sitting on the bed beside me. I felt the bed dip as she sat down, like she was completely real. I could see that Adrik got her smile, along with her eyes. The softness in his face came from her as well. He favored his father, but she made his father's harsh good looks softer.

"He has your eyes," I said as I was taking in the details of her face.

"I think that was the hardest thing for his father to get over. He used to say he could get lost in my eyes. Seeing the same eyes on his son just reminded him of his loss."

"He's still very much in love with you," I said.

She laughed quietly. "And I'm still very much in love with him. The love we have is much the same as the Jove you have for my son. It's not an average relationship. It's…" she paused like she was trying to find the words.

"Eternal," I said.

"Exactly. I should've known you'd already know," she said, smiling sweetly at me. She reached out and grabbed my hand. Surprisingly, she felt warm. Similar to Adrik's touch. "Sephie, I want to thank you. I knew you were coming for my son, but I had no idea the role you would play in my husband's life as well. Or how you would bring them together."

I scoffed. "I haven't done anything. I don't think there's anything to thank me for."

She reached up and brushed a curl from my face, just like Adrik does almost constantly. "Sweet girl. You've already set it in motion. You just have no idea. You've already brought them closer than they've ever been and this is just the beginning. Part of what makes you unique is your ability to know what the people you care about need, even before they do. Even without you being aware of it. I know you've heard stories about my husband and what a cold man he's been. It's because most of his light died with me. He was almost overtaken by his own darkness. But you. You've given him a spark and I cannot thank you enough for doing so."

"Eh, I think Adrik was right. I'm just really good at getting grumpy old men to laugh. That's all," I said, grinning at her. Curiosity got the best of me, so I asked, "were you special like Vitaliy and Adrik too?"

"No. Adrik's power comes from Vifaliy. Just like yours comes from your father. But much like you, I accepted Vitaliy for who he was completely. There is much to be said for being someone's safe harbor. Vitaliy, much like Adrik, has a giant heart for those he cares about. He just has a difficult time showing it. Adrik is much better and even better still, since meeting you. Vitaliy still very much struggles with it."

"I knew he was a cheeseball in there," I said, chewing on my bottom lip.

She laughed. "Please promise me you'll tell him that. I can't wait to hear him laugh."

"I promise I will tell him. And I have a feeling you're more special that you think. You calmed Vitaliy's storms. That's no small feat," I said. She smiled sweetly at me, brushing another curl back from my face as we both studied each other.

"It's time for you to get back. They're worried about you. Adrik worries about you the way Vitaliy used to worry about me. Ivan is almost as bad. Those men are good men, Sephie. All of them. I know you know, but they need to know that the Universe knows how good they are. Please tell them I'm sorry for making them worry," she said, squeezing my hand gently.

"Why would they be worried about me? It's only been a few minutes."

"Sweet girl. You forget. Time is different here. It's been much longer for them, which is why I need to apologize. Tell them I promise not to do this again. They're going to be angry," she said, smiling.

"They're not the boss of me," I said, laughing. "I'll tell them you apologize if you tell my father I miss him and I'd like to see him again."

"I will, Sephie. But you can tell him yourself. He constantly checks on you. Even with Ivan taking his job, he's still around. All you have to do is ask," she said. She stood up, her hand lingering on my cheek for a moment before she walked away toward the door. With each step she took toward the door, she faded a little more until she was gone completely and I was left alone in the bedroom again.

"Sephie? Sephie, love. I need you to wake up. Please wake up. Please come back to me," Adrik said. I could hear the panic in his voice. "She's not responding. She's never zoned out this completely before. I don't know what to do."

"Can you feel anything from her? I don't feel anything bad, at least, but I don't feel anything good, either," Ivan said. "Her eyes are going apeshit though."

1 giggled. She was right. They're gonna be mad.

"Sephie??" Adrik said, frantically.

It took me a minute to focus. My eyes were open, but I couldn't see anything in front of me. I reached up and rubbed my eyes. "I'm okay. I'm sorry. She's sorry, too. She said it'll never happen again." When I opened my eyes, I could see Adrik and Ivan standing in front of me, both of them clearly panicked.

"Who's she? And what won't happen again?" they both asked, as I was hit with anger from both of them. Yep. They're mad.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 361

*Adrik "

Sephie stood on her toes and whispered, "I'm gonna go take my contacts out for like ten minutes. I really need to rub my eyes for a few minutes where nobody can see me. I'll be fine. You stay. I'll be right back. Promise," she said. She kissed my cheek, but was already heading toward the bedroom before I could protest.

I noticed Ivan catch her eye before she turned down the hallway. She made a motion like she wanted to rub her eyes, so he understood what she was going to do. He stayed with the rest of us, but it was obvious he had wanted to follow her just as I did.

I continued the conversation with Vitaliy and Trino, but kept an eye on the hallway, waiting for her to return. I glanced at my watch every few minutes. She said she needed ten minutes, so I wasn't going to worry until ten minutes had passed.

When she didn't come back after ten minutes, I started to worry. I caught Ivan's eye. He was also starting to worry. Vitaliy, completely oblivious to my growing unease, called Ivan over to ask him a few questions.

Twenty minutes had passed and we still hadn't seen Sephie come back. Vitaliy and Trino were still in deep discussion, but I couldn't think about anything but Sephie. I knew her eyes were bothering her, but I didn't think it would take her this long.

After thirty minutes, I sent Ivan to go check on her. He was gone for just a minute before he reappeared in the hallway, indicating that I needed to come with him. I excused myself quickly and followed him back to the bedroom.

Sephie was sitting on the end of the bed, completely awake, but completely zoned out. She'd taken her contacts out, like she said. We could tell because her eyes couldn't pick a color to stick to.

"I tried to snap her out of it when I came back here a minute ago, but she didn't respond," Ivan said. "I've never seen her like this before."

I put my hands on her shoulders, talking to her, trying to get her to respond. She just stared blankly ahead. For twenty more minutes, she was completely nonresponsive. I couldn't get through to her. Ivan couldn't get through to her. We knew something was happening, because her eyes never stopped changing, but we had no clue what was happening.

"Should we call Andrei or Misha? Maybe one of them can figure out what the he ll is going on," Ivan said.

"They still don't know about her eyes, I'm liking keeping that a secret a little too much right now. I will if I have to, but not yet," I said. I knelt down) in front of her, my hands still on her shoulders. "Sephie? Sephie, love. I need you to wake up. Please wake up. Please come back to me," I was really starting to get worried. She'd never been this unresponsive before. "She's not responding. She's never zoned out this completely before. I don't know

what to do."

"Can you feel anything from her? I don't feel anything bad, at least, but I don't feel anything good, either," Ivan said. "Her eyes are going apeshit though."

Finally. She giggled. She still had a blank stare, but at least she made some kind of noise.

"Sephie??" I said. I was almost desperate to hear her voice.

She reached up, rubbing her eyes. She blinked, then rubbed her eyes again, saying, "I'm okay. I'm sorry. She's sorry, too. She said it'll never happen again." She finally pulled her hands away from her eyes, but it still took her a few seconds to focus on us both in front of her.

It took Ivan and I a few seconds to realize what she'd said. I stood up, feeling my anger coming on strongly. I glanced at Ivan, who was clearly bristled as well. "Who's she? And what won't happen again?" we both said.

She finally looked like she could focus. She smiled sweetly at both of us, standing up between us. "I'm very sorry. That's never happened before. I didn't even know it could happen," she said. "I'm very sorry I worried you both." She reached up and placed a hand against each of our faces.

"What happened? Did you zone out?" I asked. She shook her head no.

"This one is gonna be hard to believe. Your mother and I had a chat,"

"How is that possible?" I asked.

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"Don't ask me. I can't explain the logistics. I came in here, took my contacts out like I said I was going to, then I sat on the bed so I could fully enjoy rubbing my eyes. I felt a breeze and when I looked up, she was standing in front of me, as clear as you two are now. I heard her voice the other day, but this time I could see her," she said. She turned to look at me, smiling her sweet smile up at me. "You have her eyes."

"You heard her voice? When?" Ivan asked.

"When we took a walk with Vitaliy. Adrik's mother has always known that he would find me. She's also always known that he would find all of you, as well. She told Vitaliy so. She wanted me to tell him that she was right and he should've listened to her," she said,

"That is the kind of petty passive-aggressive behavior that I will live for as a ghost," Ivan said, laughing.

"That wasn't all she wanted me to tell him, but I think the rest of it is for Vitaliy only," she said, smacking his arm.

"What did she tell you this time?" he asked, as he grabbed her arm to keep her from smacking him again. He spun her around, facing away from him and holding her arms so she couldn't smack him anymore, wrapping her up in a bear hug, obviously relieved she was okay. It gave me a chance to see her eyes change to green as she was laughing with him.

"She wanted to thank me. And she also made me promise that I would tell Vitaliy that he's a cheeseball," she said, still laughing with Ivan's arms wrapped around her.

I couldn't help but feel complete relief that she was okay, but I was still a little taken aback by what had happened. I could tell that Sephie was holding back, but I knew she was waiting until we were alone to tell me the rest.

"I'm glad you're okay, princess. You had us worried," Ivan said, finally letting her go.

"Because my eyes were going apeshit?" she asked, giggling as she walked to me.

"Ivan's never seen them change as it happens before. They gave him a show. I was trying not to worry too much, because I never saw them go wh ite, but it was still concerning," I said.

She chewed on her bottom lip for a moment. "I'm only just beginning to get a handle on what each color means. I don't know what it means when they can't pick a color or why they won't pick a color," she said.

"Neither of us felt anything from you while you were zoned out. You were completely numb," I said.

"That's weird. Maybe it was like I was dreaming?" she said, shrugging her shoulders. "You only feel me if I'm having a nightmare. Good dreams don't set off any alarm bells. Lena is a very nice woman. Not scary at all for a ghost."

We heard a knock on the door. "That's Misha. He's worried too," she said.

Ivan went to the door and opened it, revealing a very worried Misha. "You guys disappeared. Is everything okay?"

Ivan turned toward Sephie, a questioning look on his face. "How did you know it was him and not one of the other guys?"

"I don't know. I just did," she said.

I looked at Ivan and Misha. "Everyone is okay. Give us five minutes and we'll be out. They both nodded, Ivan closed the door behind him.

*Five minutes? Really? You couldn't have said to give us an hour?" she said, a mischievous grin on her face as she slid her hands around my waist, grabbing my a ss.

Chapter 362

“Sephie

I grabbed Adrik’s hands and pulled him with me to the bathroom so I could put my contacts back in. “You were right. There is more to what your mother told me. I didn’t know how much you wanted Ivan to know right now,” I said.

He chuckled. “I thought you were holding back.”

“It’s nothing big, but I still think you should hear it before anyone else does,” I said. I had stopped in front of the mirror, pulling his arms around my waist as he stood behind me. He rested his chin on my shoulder as I went about putting the contacts in. “She said she wanted to thank me for bringing you and Vitaliy together.” I stopped and looked at Adrik in the mirror. “I know you’re about to be shocked, but 1 argued with her and told her I hadn’t done anything.” He laughed as he moved my hair out of the way so he could kiss my shoulder. “She said that much of Vitaliy’s light died with her and he was almost overtaken by his own darkness, but that I was the spark he needed to remember his own light. I told her that you were right and I was just really good at getting grumpy men to laugh.”

“You’re very good at that,” he said, smiling as he continued to kiss my neck.

“I did ask her if she was special like Vitaliy and you. She said she wasn’t. She said all your power comes from Vitaliy. Apparently all mine comes from my dad. But I think she’s special in her own right. She said she accepted Vitaliy for who he is completely right away. He said something similar to me the first day we were here. It takes a very special person to be able to do that, especially with someone as complicated as Vitaliy.”

I turned to face him, after finishing with the contacts. “She told me that Vitaliy has a giant heart for the people he cares about, much like you do. He just struggles to show it. Even more than you do. That’s when I called him a cheeseball again and she made me promise to tell him I called him that.”

Adrik laughed. “I would actually pay to see that as well. Did she say anything else?”

“She did.” I stood on my toes and pressed my lips to his gently. “She said you worry about me the same way Vitaliy used to worry about her. Ivan is almost as bad. Then she said that you all were good men. She said you needed to know that the Universe knows that you’re good men.”

I could see Adrik struggling with what I’d just told him. I watched as several emotions flashed across his face. I could see the internal struggle as he fought whether to believe her words or not.

“She’s right, you know. You are good men. Anybody with half a brain knows you’re good men,” I said, my fingers lightly running over his cheek. His breath hitched as he looked at me, his arms wrapped completely around me, holding me tightly against him. He didn’t say a word, he just held me until our five minutes were likely up and we had to rejoin everyone else.

“We should go back out. They’re going to come check on me again,” I said, loosening my hold on him.

“Not yet,” was all he said, as he pulled me closer to him. I rested my head against his hard chest. I felt his head resting on top of mine as his arms moved to keep me as close to him as possible. We stood like that for a few more minutes as I tried to help calm his storms.

We’d been back in the city for a few days. Trino was staying at the building while Viktor and Ivan helped him get a new security team setup, Gus, Oscar, and Chen were helping Trino with whatever he needed as much as they could as well.

“I’m taking the baddest motherf**kers in Colombia label away from them, Oscar. They’re all pu ssies,” I said, when we were talking about his former security team being scared of me.

“That’s fair. Totally fair,” Oscar said, laughing. “I did not expect them to wet themselves over the thought of you.”

“I really want to say that I have that effect on people, but that would just be wrong,” I said, laughing.

“Miha, don’t take it personal. We all know the truth. Don’t judge all Colombian men by the cowardice of a few,” Trino said.

“Still trying to get her to come to Colombia, than?” Gus asked. He was both amused and surprised at Trino’s words.

“A man can try,” Trino said, laughing as they went to leave Adrik’s office.

Viktor, Ivan, and Stephen had just left to the airport to pick up Vitaliy and his men, who were set to arrive that evening. I walked to Adrik, who still finishing up a few things. “I’m going to head upstairs to get started on dinner,” I said, my hand running over the back of his shoulders as he leaned over his desk.

“Just a few minutes and I’ll be done. Take the Wonder Twins with you,” he said, looking up at me, a sly smile on his face. I laughed at his use of new nickname for Andrei and Misha. I leaned down and pressed my lips to his. “I can wait on you, if you like,” I said against his lips. He reached and grabbed the back of my neck as he groaned quietly. He su cked my bottom lip into his mo uth, his tongue brushing lightly over it which made thighs clench in response. I heard him chuckle as he felt my response to his kiss. “I’ll get done much faster if I feel like I have to chase you upsta

he said.

I smiled as I stood up. “Then get back to work,” I said as seriously as I could. He laughed and smacked my a ss as I turned to leave.

I walked to Misha and Andrei’s desks quickly. There were still plenty of people here, as the workday wasn’t over yet and I could feel everyone’s eye me as I walked from Adrik’s office. Since Armando had taken me and Ivan, I’d garnered way more attention from the people in the office than I ev wanted to. It still made me uncomfortable.

They both noticed when I got to their desks. Misha stood up immediately and stood between me and any lingering eyes. “Are you going to start din gazelle?” Misha asked, shielding me from view.

“Yep. You guys want to help?”

“Don’t ask st upid questions, spider monkey,” Andrei said as he closed his computer and got up from his desk. He shot Misha a look as he turned awa from me. Before I knew it, Misha grabbed me by my hips, picking me up so I could hitch a ride with Andrei. “Close your eyes. Then you won’t see them looking at you,” Andrei said quietly.

I laughed quietly. “You two are my favorite. Don’t tell the others.”

Once we were in the safety of the elevator, Misha looked over at me. “Why does it still make you nervous when people look at you? You know that people generally tend to stare at beautiful women, right?”

I smiled at him. They were all so sweet to me. Sometimes it was overwhelming how much they cared about me. “I don’t always get the feeling that they’re staring because of that, my adorable Russian guardian. It always feels the same as when Sal was looking at my bo obs and Armando was looking at me after he cut my clothes off. Even when I know it’s not, that’s what it feels like. I don’t like it.”

Andrei held onto my legs a little tighter. “Don’t worry, spider monkey. You’re so tiny next to us that they won’t be able to look at you. We’ll protect you. I’ll carry you everywhere so you can close your eyes and won’t have to see them, if you want.”

“Bubba, you’re my favorite,” I said, squeezing his neck a little tighter. Before Misha could protest, I added, “you are too, my adorable Russian guardian. Don’t think I’ve already forgotten you just told me I was beautiful.” His handsome wide smile stretched across his face as we walked off the elevator.

Andrei and Misha just nodded to the guards outside the penthouse. “Spider monkey,” they both said as we walked past. It’s a perfectly reasonable explanation.

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Sephie

“All of Vitaliy’s guys are coming to dinner, too?” Andrei asked. I’d put him to work helping me and I think he was protesting at the amount of work in front of him.

“I assume so, but I don’t know for sure. I never really asked, now that I think about it. But I figure if they don’t, then there will be leftovers for you guys,” I said.

“I’m going to tell him not to bring them, then,” Misha said.

“Is it just because of the leftovers or you don’t like his men?” I asked, curious.

“Mostly the leftovers, but I think we’re all still unsure about unknown people since Trino’s guys, Misha said.

“It’s obvious that Aleksei is the only one that Vitaliy trusts completely. That makes me nervous for the rest of them,” Andrei said.

“Did something happen that you’re not telling me about?” I asked. I could understand they were nervous since having to deal with Trino’s guys, but it seemed like they were overly nervous.

They both looked at each other like they were trying to talk the other one into answering my question. “You realize I can fish it out of your head if you don’t tell me….” I said, stopping what I was doing and crossing my arms across my chest.

“I would like to see you try,” Misha said, a sly grin on his face.

“Challenge accepted, my adorable Russian guardian.” I walked over to him, searching his eyes the same way I would with Adrik. It took me longer, but once I got past his very weak internal protests, I could read him like a book. He was still smirking at me, thinking that I was struggling, so I let him think he could shu t me out for a few more moments.

When I turned to walk away from him, I caught Andrei’s eye. He had picked up on what was happening and was waiting for me to tell Misha everything. Those two were like brothers. They enjoyed seeing the other one not be able to get away with something.

“It’s not all his men. It’s only the new ones. The guys that have been with him for years are still solid, but the two new guys are a bit too braggadocious for your liking. They targeted you and Bubba when we were in Panama since you two are the youngest. That’s why you don’t like them. They’re as sholes and picked on you when they don’t even know you,” I said. I was actually starting to get angry at the thought of them being mean to Andrei and Misha for no reason. I knew my eyes were going dark, but they wouldn’t be able to see through the contacts. I took a deep breath, trying to stay calm, so Adrik wouldn’t rush upstairs as well. “We have a couple of options here. Either I can find the perfect way to emasculate them in front of everyone, or I can tell Vitaliy they’re not allowed to come, or you two put them in their places.”

Andrei chuckled. “You’re mad that they picked on us, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am. I didn’t know about it when we were down there. Otherwise I would’ve put a stop to it then.”

“It always happened when you were away with Boss and Vitaliy,” Misha said.

“What kind of training do they have? Same as you guys?”

“I don’t know. I know the guys that have been with him for a while have much the same training as we do, but I don’t know about these guys. They -haven’t been with Vitaliy for very long. They were with him the last time we saw him, but that was a couple of years ago,” Andrei said. He was trying to be subtle about it, but I could tell he was watching my eyes as we talked. I knew it was only a matter of time before they noticed that my demon eyes had stopped making appearances when I got angry and I’d have to come clean about my untamed eyes.

I thought for a few minutes while I went back to working on dinner. “I think it’ll stick if you two find a way to put them in their place. In front of everyone. If they don’t have the same training as you do, then it should be quite easy. That’s the best way. Much like with Mike, guys like them respect brute strength more than anything. I also can’t see Vitaliy putting up with them being disrespectful toward you guys, but he likely doesn’t know about It yet.”

Adrik walked into the penthouse, looking slightly concerned. I knew he’d felt my anger. I smiled at him. “It’s okay. I was just angry because I found out a couple of your father’s guys were a ss holes to the Wonder Twins while we were in Panama.”

“Which guys?” he asked, as he walked to me. He immediately bristled as well.

“The new guys. The guys that have been with Vitaliy for a while are fine, as always. The two new guys were je rks to Bubba and Misha because they’re the youngest,” I said, leaning into Adrik as he slid his arms around my waist from behind. He softly kissed my neck.

“When did this happen?”

“Usually when you were gone with Vitaliy,” Andrei said.

I could feel Adrik’s anger rise another notch. “Because they know my father would never allow that so they did it while he was away. Did Aleksei or any of his other men see it?”

“Not that I know of. They were usually talking with the other guys,” Misha said.

“They were just as sholes toward you two? Did they say anything else about anyone else?” Adrik asked.

Andrei sighed. “They never said it out loud. Does that count?”

“What did you pick up on, Bubba?” I asked. Andrei seemed nervous suddenly.

“I swear I wasn’t poking around in anyone’s head,” he said. He looked legitimately worried we’d be mad.

I laughed. “I believe you, Bubba. Sometimes people’s thoughts scream at me. It’s hard to ignore.”

“Oh, thank God it’s not just me,” he said.

“What were they thinking?” Adrik asked.

“Lots of animosity toward you, some toward Sephie. One of them thinks Sephie is going to make Vitaliy weak,” Andrei said.

Adrik and I both stood silent for a few moments. 1 could feel his anger, feeding into mine. I knew he was more worried about them thinking anything negatively toward me, but I also knew he wouldn’t stand for them disrespecting his men either. It didn’t matter that they were his father’s men.

“Gazelle, have you mastered keeping your demon eyes back now? I can tell you’re angry right now, but your eyes are normal,” Misha asked, clearly

curious.

Adrik looked down at me, a small smile on his face. “She’s wearing contacts,” he said.

“I knew it!” Andrei said.

Both Adrik and I laughed. “Her eyes have been doing more than just going dark, but I was struggling with feeling jealous after she was hurt for so long, so we kept it a secret. Ivan is the only one who knows, because he felt her panic and saw them before she could hide it. We knew it was only a matter of time before the rest of you figured it out.”

“What else are they doing?” Misha asked.

I looked to Adrik to explain, since he was the one that saw it happening. “Much like when her eyes go dark, the other colors of her eyes take over for different emotions. The only one that’s completely different is when she’s afraid. They go almost w hite when she’s scared. It’s scarier than her demon eyes and the reason we decided to get her contacts. She struggles with controlling her fear when it comes on. The other emotions she can control, much like her demon eyes,” he said.

“15 it the same color for the same emotion each time?” Andrei asked.

I nodded my head. “So far, green means sarcasm, blue means I’m thinking about how much I love him, light brown means I’m sad, wh ite means I’m

scared, and black means run.” Adrik laughed as he kissed my temple.

“They also sometimes constantly change, like they can’t pick a color to stick to. That’s happened a few times recently,” he said.

“You had the contacts when we were in Panama, gazelle?” Misha asked.

“Yep. I got them the day before we left.”

Both Andrei and Misha exhaled loudly, looking at each other. “Good call. We’re glad you did that. I don’t think it would’ve gone well if they saw your eyes change,” Andrei said.

I couldn’t help but laugh. I looked at Adrik. “See, I told you they would scare everyone.”

“They don’t scare us, gazelle. But everyone else is clearly not as smart as we are,” Misha said, grinning at me.

“You make a strong argument, Misha,” I said, winking at him.

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Sephle

Andrei looked at his watch, then looked at Adrik, then to me. “They’re still not due back for a while. Can we see?” he asked, tentatively.

Adrik looked to me, but I put it back on him. “It’s your call and only your call,” I said, still working on making enough food to feed a small army. Adrik looked at me for a few moments, then smiled. I could tell he was sad to no longer have the secret, but he also seemed happy to show them. Like he was proud of how weird I was becoming. He simply nodded his head.

I went to take the contacts out, thankful to have a few moments without them. When I came back to the kitchen, I was still rubbing my eyes intermittently.

“The contacts bother you, huh?” Andrei asked when he saw me rubbing my eyes.

“Yeah, I can handle them for short periods but they make my eyes itch when I wear them for longer periods,” I said. I walked to Adrik. It was easy to think about how much I loved him, which I knew would turn my eyes blue. The look in his eyes let me know it had worked. He wrapped one arm around me, but motioned for both Andrei and Misha to come to us.

He jerked his head slightly in my direction. “Blue means she’s thinking about how much she loves me,” he said, showing the Wonder Twins.

“That’s your normal blue. It just took over the other two colors,” Misha said. He was clearly fascinated by my new trick.

“I call them my mood ring eyes now, since they seem to change with my ever-changing moods,” I said, laughing. I watched as Andrei and Misha’s eyes got bigger, signaling that my eyes had switched to green.

“Green usually means sarcasm,” Adrik said.

“But you still have the demon eyes, right?” Andrei asked.

I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to make them go dark. When I opened my eyes, they both laughed. “Yep, still there,” Misha said.

“What were the other ones?” Andrei asked,

“White means I’m scared. I’d rather not have to show you that one right now. I don’t know how far away it still works on Ivan, but he definitely feels it when I’m scared. I don’t want to distract him right now,” I said.

“The only other one we’ve seen is they turned golden brown, almost amber, when she was thinking about Trino seeing his mom for the last time,” Adrik said. “That’s only happened once, though.”

“You don’t have to try to show us that one, either. I can’t wait until you start making up new colors. I want to see purple and orange next. Get inventive, spider monkey,” Andrei said, teasing me.

“I would try if I had any clue it was happening. I was only just barely getting a handle on the demon eyes and they started doing this on their own. I don’t have a clue when it’s happening. It’s not like I can feel it. I just see it in his expression that they’ve changed, but I still sometimes have to ask what color they are,” I said, looking at Adrik.

“Are you going to tell Stephen and Viktor about it?” Misha asked. He couldn’t keep the grin off his face when he asked.

“Might as well. They’ve both likely noticed the absence of her demon eyes, just as you did,” Adrik said.

“Ten bucks says Stephen offers to turn you to a vampire because of it,” Misha said.

“You’re on,” I said, laughing at him.

I managed to pull Adrik away from the Wonder Twins when I went to put the contacts back in before Viktor got back with Vitaliy and his men. He was standing behind me in his new favorite spot while I put my contacts in, his arms wrapped around my waist, his chin resting on my shoulder.

“You’re okay with having told them?” I asked. I was fairly certain he didn’t mind telling them, but I also knew how much he loved having a secret that was just between us.

“Of course, solnishko. I knew it was only a matter of time before they found out. I sometimes forget how observant they all are, especially of you. Ivan just has a leg up because he can feel your emotions like I can, but given what happened earlier, I think Misha might be tapping into that as well. You didn’t look angry when he asked about your demon eyes. You never look angry, unless you’re an absolute raging inferno and even then, you generally only look slightly miffed,” he said, rubbing his stubble against my neck lightly.

I laughed. “I wasn’t a raging inferno, but I was angry about them being picked on. I wish I would’ve known it was happening while we were down there. I would’ve put a stop to it,” I said. I caught him smiling at me in the mirror as I put the second contact in. It was a strange sight to see my one seemingly normal eye and one demon eye.

“You should only wear one contact at a time, just to f**k with people,” he said, laughing.

“I don’t think the guys are going to like how busy that’s going to keep them, fighting off random people that think I’m possessed.”

“Worth it,” he said, still laughing, his lips against my neck. “As for the Wonder Twins’ problem, I’ll talk to Vitaliy. Those guys haven’t been with him long, but I won’t stand for them disrespecting my men.”

“Is that going to cause even more problems, though? If they already have animosity toward you and I, will that just make it worse? What if Andrei and Misha give them an old-fashioned attitude adjustment? Do you think that will work? Do Vitaliy’s guys have the same kind of training that your guys do?” I asked.

“The other guys do. I don’t know about these two. They haven’t been with my father very long. Two of his guys retired a few years ago, so he needed replacements. I don’t know much about these two. Aleksei will know,” he said.

“I know they’re both bothered by it, even though they’re trying to act like they’re not. Misha made me fish it out of his head what happened. He’s really bothered by it. I’m sure Bubba is too. They’re both the sensitive ones, but they also shouldn’t have to deal with this. It makes me want to punch both of your father’s guys in the nose.”

“If I haven’t told you lately, you’re extra adorable when your hackles go up,” he said, turning me to face him.

“I don’t have hackles,” I said, matter-of-factly.

“Oh you do. They go up even when you don’t like someone’s tone with one of us. It’s very endearing,” he said. “I sometimes want to make it worse and then turn you loose, just to see what will happen.”

“You’re a little bit evil,” I said, laughing at him.

“That’s a lie. I’m a lot evil,” he said, pressing his lips to mine.

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*Adrik ”

Viktor, Ivan, and Stephen walked into the penthouse with Vitaliy, Aleksei, and the rest of my father’s men. Viktor was especially happy to be back, as Sephie told him she would make his favorite meal since it was easy to make enough to feed the small army we had present.

“Sephie, that smells like I love you even more than the last time you made this,” Viktor said. She quickly freed up her hands, walking quickly to him and hugging his neck. It never mattered how long they were gone or what they were gone for, she was always incredibly happy to see them again. It made them want to come back to her as soon as possible.

“Papa Bear!” she said as he picked her up off the floor, his giant frame completely dwarfing her. He kissed her cheek, setting her back down. She walked to Ivan, hugging his neck as well. She said something quietly to him, which clearly surprised him, but she moved quickly to Stephen. While Stephen had always been shy about any kind of affection from her for the longest time, he now loved it as much as the rest of them. He wrapped his arms around her and picked her up just like Viktor did, telling her how happy his stomach was going to be in a matter of minutes.

Once Stephen released her, she caught Vitaliy watching her interact with them. She gave him her best smile. I watched him completely melt in front of her. She walked to him and hugged him. “Is it weird that I missed you, old man?” she asked as she hugged his neck.

He laughed. “Maybe it’s you that needs to get out more this time,” he said.

“Fair. Completely fair,” she said. She grabbed his hand and led him toward the kitchen. It was hard to tell, but I think he was almost embarrassed that I caught his si lly grin as he dutifully followed her.

“Battista called yesterday. He has information. He’ll be here in a few days,” Vitaliy said, breaking the silence as everyone did more eating than talking.

“Did he give any indications on what he found or he preferred to remain frustratingly mysterious?” Sephie asked.

“Net. He won’t discuss anything over the phone,” Vitaliy said.

“I mean, I understand why. Doesn’t mean I have to like it,” Sephie said. I was finding that she was starting to dislike surprises almost as much as I did.

Vitaliy winked at her. “Patience was always difficult for me as well, sladkaya.”

After dinner, Viktor and Ivan got my father’s men set up in apartments on the lower floors. Aleksei stayed behind with Vitaliy in the penthouse. I actually had plenty of room in the penthouse for all of them to stay there, but I preferred that no one came to the penthouse. I was torn about whether to allow my father and Aleksei to stay there, but Sephie practically insisted.

“I know you’re not terribly close with him, but he is your father. And Alyosha is practically an uncle. He’s known you your entire life. I don’t want those two as sholes staying here, but it’s a nice gesture for Vitaliy and Aleksei to do so,” she had said when we discussed it the day before.

She had enjoyed teasing me when she found out I didn’t want them in the penthouse because it drastically cut down on the options of where we could have s*x while they were here. It also meant she would have to be quieter while they were here, which I hated, and she was not very good at. Given that we were both addicted to each other, it was going to, well, su ck.

She laughed once she searched my eyes to find the reason for my grumpiness on the subject. She reached up, kissing my cheek. Then she put her lips next to my ear, whispering, “face down, a ss up it is.” She took one step back from me to see my reaction, her wide smile across her face. As soon as she saw me lose complete control thinking about what she’d just said, she ran to the bedroom. Her laughter only serving to make me run faster to

catch her.

I caught up to her just as she made it to the bedroom door. I grabbed her waist, picking her up off the floor and spinning her around just so I could hear her squeal. “You can’t say things like that and expect to get away from me, solnishko,” I said.

“Who said I wanted to get away? I just wanted to get to the bedroom very quickly. Mission accomplished,” she said as 1 set her down. She turned to face me, wrapping her arms around my neck.

“I approve of this life choice,” I said, pulling her shirt off and throwing it on the floor. 1 had the rest of her clothes off in under a minute. My lips found hers, then moved down to her neck. I could hear her breaths starting to come quicker as she felt my teeth grazing the soft skin of her neck.

“You’re very overdressed,” she said. Her voice was breathy with desire. I felt her hands working to get rid of my pants. As I stepped out of them, she got two more buttons undone on my shirt. I quickly pulled it off over my head, immediately pulling her back to me. She moaned quietly as my hands roamed over her back, down to her a ss. I grabbed her a ss, pushing my hips into her, wanting her to feel exactly what she could do to me.

Her hands slid around my waist into the waistband of my boxer briefs, pushing them down to free my hard co ck. She knelt down in front of me, sliding them off all the way. Instead of standing back up, she grabbed my co ck with one hand. I exhaled, knowing what she was going to do. It never failed to make me c*m quickly when she went down on me if she did it for very long.

Her cool hand wrapped around my shaft lightly. I felt her warm breath on the tip as she licked it. She loved to make me twitch as she teased me. I could feel her desire coming on strongly as she wrapped her lips around it, taking me fully into her mo uth. My hands went to her hair as I closed my eyes, my head falling backward as I was lost completely to the feeling of her mo uth on me.

She kept her rhythm slow, knowing I would be completely incapable of lasting very long if she went any faster. Just when she felt me starting to struggle to control myself, she stood up, a devious grin on her face. I wrapped one arm around her hips, pulling her legs around me as I picked her up. We were still just inside the door to the bedroom. I pushed her up against the wall as my lips crashed into hers. It never mattered what she did. I could never get enough of her.

I could feel the heat from her pu ssy and feel how wet she was. She reached down between us and positioned me so I could slide inside her. She leaned her head back against the wall, her eyes closed as she felt my full length inside her. It was my favorite sight. Every single time. She moaned quietly as she adjusted to my size.

I pushed my hips into her harder, enjoying her response to me. Watching her get lost in her own euphoria made me forget about everything but her. I would never tire of it. I pulled out of her slowly before slamming back into her roughly. I stilled as she moaned loudly. I pulled out slowly again. This time, she knew what I was going to do. She opened her eyes, smiling at me as she waited for it. Her eyes were the deepest depth of the ocean blue, which had become my favorite out of all the changes they’d come up with. I watched her as her eyes rolled back in her head, another moan escaping as 1 slammed into her roughly again. Her pu ssy clenched around me as she was climbing toward an o*gasm. I teased her a few more times before increasing the rhythm. I felt her fingernails dig into my shoulders as she couldn’t do anything but hang on as I pushed her to o*gasm. Her moans were loud, her breaths quick. If I wouldn’t be able to hear her scream for a few days while we weren’t the only ones in my penthouse, then I was going to enjoy it as much as I could tonight.

I felt her legs start to shake as she started to push her pleasure onto me. She’d learned that she could essentially share her o*gasm with me and I was completely addicted to it. It was so different from what I felt and lasted much longer. She was breathing heavy, her moans making it difficult to catch her breath. She breathlessly said my name and I knew I was done for. I thrust hard into her a few more times before I couldn’t hold on any longer and

found my own release.

I kept her pressed against the wall for a few minutes as we both worked to catch our breath. I still worried about her lung, as it still wasn’t 100%, but she was continuously getting better. She seemed to manage through s*x okay, but she hadn’t been brave enough to go for a run yet. I still worried about pushing her too hard. I’d never been so scared as I was watching her struggle to breathe the few times it happened. It didn’t help that I could. feel her fear in that moment.

“Are you okay, love? Did I go too hard?” I asked when she still hadn’t completely caught her breath.

She nodded. “It’s calming down,” she said, still trying to catch her breath. “I should run from you more often.” She grinned at me, her fingers running lightly through my hair. G*d, I love her.

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“Adrik

Once Viktor and Ivan returned, I brought up the subject of my father’s men with Aleksei. Sephie had Vitaliy’s attention, along with most of the guys” attention, in her usual entertaining way.

“The two new guys. What kind of training do they have?” I asked Aleksei.

“Not quite the same as what I’d like, but it’s difficult to find someone with that kind of training these days. People are getting soft,” he said, half- disgusted. “I’ve been trying to work on their training to get them up to speed, but they complain. Never in front of Vitaliy, though. They’re at least

that smart.”

I thought for a few minutes. It might be a good idea to have Misha and Andrei put them in their places, after all. I explained the situation to Aleksei. “They’re disrespectful of my men. I would like to remind them of their place. If Sephie were completely healed, I would consider letting her loose on them. She’s arguably more pi ssed about this than I am,” I said.

Aleksei laughed. “She’s just as protective of your men as they are of her, then?”

I nodded. “You should see her go from zero to rage in a split second if someone takes the wrong tone with one of us.”

“I would actually like to see that, now that you mention it,” he said, thoughtfully. “What do you propose for the little flowers?”

“I’d like for Misha and Andrei to teach them a lesson, since they seem to want to target those two. They’re both lethal, Andrei even more so since he started training Sephie. It’s seemed to sharpen him up considerably,” I said.

“Teaching is always a good tool. It forces you to stay ahead of the student. I saw her at your father’s house. He’s working hard to stay ahead of her.”

“That was nothing. She’s still at maybe 60% of what she was before she was taken. Armando really did a number on her. The only reason I didn’t ki ll him right then was because her lung collapsed and she couldn’t breathe,” I said.

“They were able to pull you off him?” he asked, surprised.

“They didn’t have to. She did. She put her hand on my back and told me she needed me. The bloodlust stopped instantly and I was only concerned

with her.”

Aleksei cursed under his breath. “I’ve never seen you stop. That’s impressive.”

“It’s her. I don’t know how she does it, but I can’t live without it now,” I said.

He was quiet for a moment. “Are you training in the morning?” he asked. I nodded my head. “We will train with you. It’s good to spar with new partners. We haven’t had anyone new in a while. I’m guessing your guys haven’t either. Misha and Andrei will get their chance then.”

Sephie had noticed me deep in discussion with Aleksei. She found a moment to step away from everyone else and walked to us. Aleksei’s face softened when she smiled at him as she tucked herself into my side. “You two are scheming without me, aren’t you?” she said, grinning at both of us.

“The Wonder Twins will get their chance for a much-needed attitude adjustment in the morning,” I said.

“I’ll be grateful if they get their a sses beat. Serves them right for not wanting to further their training.” Aleksei said.

Sephie smiled at both of us, but I could feel her mood shift quickly. She smiled through it, but said, “let’s hope it turns out better than the last time.” She said it quietly enough that Aleksei didn’t hear her, but I did. I pulled her in front of me, wrapping both my arms around her shoulders as she hid her face in my chest. I knew she was okay with what happened with Mike, for the most part, but she still had days where she struggled with it. Even though she did the right thing, even though we knew he was working for Anthony, she still struggled to accept it some days…

I caught Ivan’s eye as he felt her mood shift as well. Surprisingly, both Misha and Andrei also turned to check on her at almost the same time that Ivan did. That’s new. She held onto me tightly for a few moments, then sighed. She lifted her head from my chest, asking, “do they know this yet?”

“Not yet. Vitaliy isn’t completely aware of what’s going on with his men.” I looked at Aleksei. “Do you want to keep him in the dark or let him know?”

“He’ll enjoy knowing. He’s not fond of those two. They have big shoes to fill, granted,” he said, then didn’t finish his thought.

I looked down at Sephie. “Then we can tell them now,” I said, smiling at her.

“Good. The Wonder Twins are worried that something is wrong already. Ivan, too,” she said. She hadn’t taken her eyes off me since she lifted her head. from my chest. She hadn’t seen them checking on her.

“How did you know that, solnishko?”

“I don’t know. I just did,” she said, shrugging her shoulders.

I squinted my eyes at her. “New level unlocked,” I said, as she laughed and hugged me tighter.

Andrei and Misha were standing next to Ivan in the kitchen as we walked back to everyone. Sephie walked between Andrei and Misha, hooking her arms through one of theirs. “When were you two planning on telling me that you could feel me now?” she asked quietly.

Ivan looked surprised as he looked at both of them, then looked to me. Everyone else got quiet, as Viktor and Stephen had heard her as well. Andrei looked nervous again. Poor kid was overwhelmed with everything going on. I was surprised with how well Misha was handling everything. I think he’d had more practice at it than Andrei. Everything was so new for Andrei and he wasn’t sure what to do with any of it.

I couldn’t help but laugh at Andrei’s expression. “We know you weren’t snooping, Andrei.”

His cheeks flushed slightly. “It started for me when we were in Panama. I felt her anger when you were gone with Vitaliy and I saw Ivan move to check on her. That helped me figure out what it was. Then when she disappeared for a while, I felt her get startled, but then it was like she was all over the place, then nothing. That’s when Misha noticed it, too. That’s when he came to check on you.”

“And since then? Has it happened again?” I asked.

Misha nodded his head. “She doesn’t like walking around the office by herself right now. It makes her really nervous. We could both feel it earlier when she walked from your office to come get us to come up here.”

“You guys felt that? That’s why you asked me about it?” she asked.

“Yeah, we knew you were on your way to us before we saw you. That’s why Misha picked you up before you realized what he was doing. We were trying to get you out of there quickly. My computer was slow or we would’ve got you faster,” Andrei said.

This was new for me. I knew she was shy about people looking at her, especially after being taken, but she never felt nervous in the office to me. I looked at her. “This is true? I haven’t felt this.”

“That’s because it doesn’t usually happen when I’m with you. I think people are scared to look at you. They’re more curious when I’m with the guys and it’s especially bad when I’m by myself,” she said as she walked to me.

Misha looked at me. “She said it feels like when Sal and Armando were looking at her. Even though she knows it’s not the same, that’s what it feels like.”

I pulled her to me. I knew she was still dealing with everything that had happened. “It’s okay. I can handle it. I just don’t like it right now,” she said.

“Can you feel them as well like you feel Adrik and Ivan?” Vitaliy asked, clearly curious how everything worked.

“Not as strongly yet,” she said, looking at both Andrei and Misha.

She seems to know what they’re doing though. She knew it was Misha at the door when he came to check on her,” Ivan said.

“She knew they both felt her mood just shift, along with Ivan just a few minutes ago,” I said.

In his quiet, serious way, Stephen said, “Vlad is going to be ecstatic when he hears about this development.” We all erupted into laughter.

Vitaliy and Aleksei both looked confused. “Who’s Vlad?” they asked.

“He’s an old friend. Don’t worry, you’ll love him. Looks a little grumpy on the outside, but has a great sense of humor. Just don’t bring up his strange eating habits. He’s very sensitive about it,” Stephen said, which caused even more laughter from all of us.

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Adrik

Once we had finished laughing, I looked at Vitaliy. “Your new guys. What do you think of them?”

He scoffed. “Mediocre at best. It was difficult to replace Yuri and Dmitri. Those two were the best we could find, which is not saying much,” he said.

“They’ve been very disrespectful to my men. I didn’t know about it until we had already left Panama. I’d like to teach them a lesson tomorrow,” I said.

Vitaliy simply nodded his head. “I would very much like you to teach them a lesson tomorrow. They’re too soft. Sladkaya could beat them, even though she’s still not 100% right now.”

“That’s because I have the best trainer ever,” she said, smiling at Andrei.

“From what I saw the other day, I will not argue with you,” Vitaliy said. “You have my permission to do whatever you need with the little flowers.”

I chuckled at both him and Aleksei calling his guys little flowers. I looked at Andrei and Misha. “You’ll get your chance in the morning, then. Don’t hold back,” I said.

I felt Séphic stir next to me the following morning. I knew it was earlier than usual, as it was still mostly dark outside. She had one arm and one leg thrown over me and her hand was lazily tracing circles on my back. “Good morning,” she said quietly when she saw my eyes open just enough to notice it was still dark out.

“You’re awake earlier than usual,” I said, closing my eyes again and pulling her closer to me. Not wanting to wake up yet.

“Mmm…I can’t seem to get my brain to shu t off.”

I opened my eyes to look at her. I knew she had been forced to remember the situation with Mike after hearing about Andrei and Misha’s experience/ with my father’s men. She was worried for them and what would happen this morning. As I ran my hand over her back, down to her a ss and thigh, I reminded her, “you did the right thing, solnishko. He was never going to walk out of here that day. If that hadn’t happened, there’s no telling what he had planned with Anthony, either. He was a threat. An even bigger one than we realized. You took care of it. You protected all of us.”

She was quiet for a minute, her hands never still as she thought about what I just said. She was looking down, but when she looked up at me, I could see her eyes swirling. This time, however, there was wh ite mixed in, so I knew she was trying to hold off on feeling her fear. While I knew she was struggling internally, I adored watching her eyes change. It was mesmerizing.

She finally smiled at me, her eyes landing on the deepest depth of the ocean blue. “Sometimes I need a reminder,” she said quietly. She reached up and pressed her lips to mine, sweetly.

“I will remind you as often and as many times as you need it, love.”

Andrei, Misha, and Ivan were waiting on us when we came out of the bedroom. Apparently, they were having trouble sleeping too. Andrei was making coffee for everyone. Vitaliy and Aleksei were still in their rooms. The sun had barely started to rise, it was still so early.

“Where’s Papa Bear and Yoden?” Sephie asked as she walked to Ivan to hug him good morning.

“I think they’re still sleeping,” Ivan said. “None of us could sleep anymore, so we came up here.”

“Same, Squish. Same,” she said. She walked to Misha next, sliding her arm around his shoulders. “You’re more bothered by this than you’re letting on,” she said, kissing his cheek. “Even Squish is bothered by the fact that those two as sholes singled you two out.” Misha tried to laugh, but it was clear on his face that she was right. She thought for a minute, continuing on to Andrei, who handed her a fresh cup of coffee. “This is why I waited until I had the six of you to protect me to show anyone how different I was. As a general rule, people su ck.” She looked thoughtful for a moment, then she and

Andrei looked at each other like they’d both just had the same thought. He raised his eyebrow at her, but she shook her head no discreetly. She would tell us whatever it was in good time, She leaned her head onto Andrei’s shoulder, once again lost in thought for a few moments.

She stood up, walking to me as I finished making my coffee. “You all know that something happened when I disappeared at Vitaliy’s house,” she said. She turned away from me, leaning back against me as she held her mug with both hands. I slid one arm around her waist, watching the guys’ faces. They all nodded. “It was a new one for me. It’s never happened before. It may never happen again, but I saw Adrik’s mother. We had a chat.”

“Like you see your father sometimes?” Misha asked.

She nodded. “Except he always comes in my dreams. This time, I wasn’t dreaming. She was in the same room as me, plain as day to me. But it looked like I’d zoned out completely when Ivan and Adrik found me. They couldn’t snap me out of it. That’s also why I think I went numb to all of you. It was like I was sleeping.”

“Her eyes were going crazy, though. I’ve never seen anything like it,” Ivan said. He was still surprised at being able to watch her eyes change as it happened.

“We mostly talked about Vitaliy and Adrik, but she gave me a message for all of you, too. She told me that you’re all good men. I know this. She knows. this. But she said that you guys needed to know that the Universe knows how good you all are.”

I watched as Misha clearly felt goosebumps over his entire body. He rubbed his arms, shaking it off. Andrei was looking down as he processed what Sephie had just said and Ivan looked almost like he was fighting back tears. I knew how they all felt in that moment.

She sighed. “Whatever happens this morning. I need you to remember that,” she said, taking another sip of coffee. “Now, who wants bacon?”

It was exactly what was needed to help them break out of their own heads. Viktor and Stephen walked in shortly after she had started making breakfast. Vitaliy and Aleksei walked out soon after. I found myself grateful that we’d had a few extra minutes with those three. They clearly needed it.

We’d all been somewhat surprised at our reaction to Trino’s men having a problem with Sephie being able to know things she shouldn’t know. Finding out that Trino could’ve been killed by his men if they’d known about Misha and Andrei made it all the more real for us. People always fear what they don’t understand and we had difficultly explaining what was happening to all of us. We were already wary of people we don’t know. Now, we were extra cautious. Misha and Andrei being bullied like schoolchildren wasn’t helping.

It was starting to feel like us against the world.

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Sephie

The two as sholes – I don't even know their names. I don't want to know their names. were the last ones to the gym. Viktor was sparring with one of Vitaliy's other guys that had been with him for years. They were well matched. Aleksei was right. It was good to get new sparring partners. When you constantly sparred with the same person, it was easy to fall into a routine. Since I had five to choose from, I hadn't reached a point where I needed a new partner, but there was sometimes a routine with a few of the guys. Mostly Viktor and Stephen, as they took it easy on me. They were still worried about hurting me when they sparred with me. Ivan used to be, but after he saw what happened with Mike, he turned up the pressure on me the few times we sparred before he and I were taken. I had to admit to enjoying the challenge. He was surprisingly fast for such a massive human.

everyone

The greatest part of the morning, for me anyway, was the way that the other guys would watch the two sparring. When they took a break, offered advice and brought to light areas that could be improved. It looked like they were fighting, but it was a learning experience for everyone. The same happened when Stephen got in the ring with another of Vitaliy's regular guys. I enjoyed seeing them being able to sharpen their skills even more. It never hurt that they were all chiseled, handsome men that generally took their shirts off at some point.

Because Vitaliy's men knew Ivan and knew that he'd had "extra" training, even though they didn't know the whole story, none of them would spar with him. Apparently, he had a reputation. I looked to Andrei, who was standing next to me. "They're really scared to spar with him?" I asked, completely surprised.

Andrei chuckled. "He still takes it very easy on you, spider monkey."

"And here I thought he wasn't holding back as much," I said, crossing my arms across my chest like I was pouting.

It made Andrei laugh. "You know he has more training than pretty much any human alive. He controls it with us, but he likes to challenge new people

a little too much."

"That tracks," I said, laughing at the thought of Ivan getting enjoyment out of almost killing someone.

Adrik stepped into the ring, motioning for Ivan to follow him. This was new. Adrik only sparred with the guys on very rare occasions. I had asked him about it one night when we were alone, curious as to why he didn't practice. The next morning, he sparred with Viktor, just to show me that apparently he did not need to practice. Poor Viktor. It took him a week to recover.

Ivan's devious grin spread across his face as he jumped into the ring. I also caught Vitaliy's smirk as he watched his son in the ring. He was hard to read, but he was clearly proud. He knew of Ivan's training as well. He also knew Adrik had nothing to be worried about.

I had to admit to enjoying the look of shock on Vitaliy's men's faces as they watched Adrik agree to spar with Ivan. Those two walked to the side of the ring, close to where I was standing with Andrei. I heard Adrik tell Ivan not to hold back. "Might as well give them a reason to be pu ssies," he said. He caught my eye, smirking at me as he knew I'd heard him.

I couldn't help but laugh. "I fully support this kind of passive-aggressive behavior," I said, making Andrei laugh with me.

While everyone had been insightful when it came to Viktor and Stephen and their two opponents, there was silence watching Adrik and Ivan. There was nothing to critique, no improvements to be made. They were so well-matched that it was almost like they'd choreographed it beforehand. Both of them were breathing hard, sweating as they each tried to outdo the other. Each hit was perfectly countered, each kick was expertly blocked.

"Yeah, he's totally still taking it easy on me and I might love him a little more because of it," I said, my eyes wide watching both of them. I could feel that they were both enjoying it, as well. There was almost a giddiness to both of them that I could feel. They didn't outwardly show it. They looked like they were trying to ki ll each other, But inside, they were both enjoying this.

I caught Vitaliy watching them. The look of satisfaction on his face was everything. I almost wanted to take a picture of it so I could show Adrik later. I glanced at the other guys' faces, finally looking at the two as sholes. They were shocked. Good. I hope they're worried.

Ivan and Adrik went on much longer than the first two matches. There was no clear winner between them, they just decided to stop. Vitally's men stayed quiet, silently glad they'd refused to spar with Ivan. Aleksei walked up beside me and Andrei, as Adrik was climbing out of the ring beside us. He said quietly, "you might be solving the problem of the little flowers today and creating a new one for me."

Adrik raised his eyebrow, wadding his shirt up in his hand to wipe the sweat from his face. Aleksei chuckled. "They might quit on their own. Then

we're going to have to find replacements for them."

I looked at Andrei. He had been nervous, but now that his time was nearing, he was focused. I glanced at the other side of the ring where Misha was. He looked just as focused. They both knew that Ivan was the best out of all of us, but they also knew they could hold their own with him. I'd seen it. Those two as sholes didn't stand a chance if they weren't taking their training seriously.

Adrik said quietly, "don't hold back, Andrei. It's not your fault they haven't taken their training seriously. You're the wake up call they need."

Andrei looked at me, then Adrik. He nodded once before pulling his shirt off and stepping in the ring. Aleksei informed as shole #1 that it was his turn. He did not look as nervous as I thought he was going to be when he saw Andrei step into the ring. I looked at Adrik, "that mo ron still thinks he has the advantage over Bubba because he's so much younger. His day is about to be ruined."

Ivan walked up, handing Adrik a bottle of water. "Squish, I just want to thank you for holding back when you spar with me. You clearly love me and I'm here for it." I said.

He laughed. "I don't have to hold back as much as I used to, princess. You're making serious progress."

"I happen to have very good trainers," I said, smiling sweetly at him. I looked between both Adrik and Ivan, each standing on each side of me. "I could feel how much you two enjoyed that. You were almost giddy."

They both chuckled. They looked over my head at each other. "It's been a few years since we've done that. We should do it more," Adrik said. "I forgot how much fun you are."

"It's the only time I get a challenge, Ivan said.

"Do you two want me to leave so you can bromance in peace?" I asked, smirking at both of them. They both laughed loudly, causing everyone to look at us. While I never cared that the guys were looking at me, I suddenly panicked when Vitaliy's men looked at me. This was really becoming an annoying development in my life.

Ivan and Adrik both stepped in front of me, partially shielding me from everyone. Andrei stepped back in front of me as well in the ring. I saw Misha walk from the other side of the ring to quietly stand behind me. Not a single one of them said a word, they just silently moved to make sure I felt safe..

"I love you all," I said quietly.

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Sephle

Andrei’s opponent took advantage of his momentary lack of focus when he was worried about me to launch his first attack. Rude. He landed the first hit, which Andrei took like a pro. 1 could feel that he almost enjoyed it. He was calm, like he was feeling out the other guy’s skills first.

Andrei might’ve been calm, but my anger was coming to the surface watching the other guy in the ring with him. He was so f**king smug it was irritating. I found myself wishing I could give Andrei some of my anger. Since I’d learned how to control it better, it was quite useful, especially when sparring. It amped up the intensity for me. I felt stronger and faster when I was using my anger.

Andrei pushed as shole #1 back, then I caught him looking at me, a look of surprise on his face. I saw it, but it didn’t quite register as I was still busy thinking about how I wanted to share my anger with him.

We watched as Andrei played it safe with his opponent for a few more minutes, but then we all saw it happen. It looked exactly like what they’d been telling me happened when my switch flipped. Andrei’s switch flipped and he went from defense to offense in a split second.

“Holy shi t, who knew he had a switch too,” Misha said behind me.

Once he switched, I could feel Andrei’s anger just as clearly as Adrik and Ivan. I could also clearly feel that his was feeding into mine, the same way the other two did. There was a difference to him, too. While both Adrik and Ivan felt like chaos personified, Andrei’s anger was quiet. Controlled, but no less deadly. I found myself happy to feel it.

I wanted to tell the guys what I was feeling, but I didn’t want to interrupt Andrei’s focus, so I waited. While as shole #1 had started the match thinking that he had the upper hand, it was very obvious that he was sadly mistaken. Andrei was on the attack and that guy couldn’t do anything but try to defend himself as best he could. He kept trying to position himself against the ropes, but each time Andrei would push him away from the ropes. They knew if someone got caught on the ropes, the match was essentially done. He was trying to end the match without an obvious surrender and Andrei wouldn’t give it to him. I was so proud of him in that moment.

As shole #1 gave out before he could get the match ended. His legs gave out on him and he tripped trying to step away from Andrei. He landed hard on the mat and stayed down long enough that we all knew he was done for. We watched him tap the mat twice, indicating that he gave up and was clearly admitting defeat. Andrei simply turned away from him, wulking back toward us. Once he was facing away from the others, we saw him smile. My heart might’ve swelled watching him take pride in what had just happened.

He climbed out of the ring, wiping the swent from his face. He caught my eye and I knew he had something he wanted to talk about, but he stayed quiet as it was Misha’s turn. Once Misha climbed into the ring, Andrei took his spot behind me. He leaned forward, quietly saying, “whatever you just did for me, do the same for him. It helped.”

Adrik and Ivan both heard him as well. They turned to look at me and then him. I looked back at Andrei, somewhat surprised. “I don’t know what I just did though.”

“Whatever you were thinking about, think the same with Misha. You’ll see,” he said.

Misha pulled his shirt off, tossing it back toward us. He felt nervous, too. The same as Andrei did when his match first started. I watched as shole #7 climb into the ring. He had a little less bravado than his buddy, but he was still more smug than I would’ve liked. It suddenly hit me. I could push my anger to Andrei. It wasn’t his switch; it was my switch that flipped.

I heard him chuckle quietly behind me. “Do it again,” was all he said.

I started to think about the same things with Misha as I had for Andrei. I wanted to push my anger to him to give him even more of an advantage. It was clear with Bubba that he didn’t need my help, but I wanted an extra “f**k you” to those two as sholes. Misha was holding his own with his opponent, learning his moves just as Andrei had done. I concentrated on my anger, noticing that both Ivan and Adrik felt it this time, looking down at

ΠE.

They looked back at Misha just in time to see the switch flip with him just as it had with Andrei. He switched to offense in the blink of an eye. He was faster than Andrei, as Misha was a little leaner than the other guys. He was similar to Adrik’s build. He probably had an easier time finding suits than the other four guys. But he was just as strong. Combined with his speed, it meant the other guy never had a chance.

Like Andrei, I could now feel Misha’s anger. I wasn’t surprised at all to find out that there was a feeling of f**kery in his anger. He was working to figure out how best to embarrass that guy in front of everyone, for maximum humor and maximum embarrassment. I fully supported it.

While Andrei drug out his match, emasculating his opponent by exhausting him in front of everyone, Misha made quick work of as shole #2. He took his legs out from under him, sending him to the mat hard and fast. It knocked the wind out of the guy. He almost lost consciousness, but managed to hang on. He was smart enough to tap out though. He didn’t want a repeat of that fall. Misha stood over him for a moment while the guy tried to catch his breath. He didn’t say a word, he just stared him down as he watched him struggle to breathe for a moment. I don’t think those two are going to be a problem anymore.

When Misha climbed out of the ring, he looked straight at me, his eyes wide. “How did you do that?” he asked quietly.

Adrik noticed the looks from some of the other guys. He said quietly, “not now. Not here.”

We all nodded. Viktor and Stephen walked up, congratulating Misha and Andrei. They picked up on something, but didn’t ask about it while we were still with everyone else. Aleksei walked over, clearly amused at what had just happened. “I’m going to get enjoyment out of this for a very long time,” he said. The other guys that had been with Vitaliy for years were also clearly enjoying it.

Vitaliy walked up, a small smile on his face. “You’ve given me a treat this morning,” he said before walking back into the gym to complete his own workout with Aleksei.

Adrik, smirking, told the guys to come to the penthouse before getting cleaned up so we could take advantage of having the penthouse to ourselves for a few minutes before Vitaliy and Aleksei got done.

Once upstairs, Viktor and Stephen were curious about what happened, as they weren’t close enough to hear Andrei after his match. Andrei said, “I don’t know how, but she managed to push her anger to me. It was like an in sane power boost for me.” He looked to Misha. “You felt it too, right?”

“Yeah, it was like Mario eating one of those magic mushrooms,” he said, his wide smile stretching across his face.

Adrik looked at me, surprised. He’d been feeling me pushing things to him for a while now, but neither of us knew I’d be able to do it with anyone else. “Is it the same with them?” he asked, curious.

“I don’t think so. It was more difficult. They feel different, too,” I said.

“Your anger levels were off the charts, princess. I could feel that,” Ivan said.

“I think I had to get to that level to be able to push it to them. I can do it much easier with you and easier still with Adrik.”

“You guys saw the switch flip, right?” Andrei asked. Everyone nodded. “It wasn’t my switch. I don’t have a switch. Neither does Misha. It was her

switch.”

“It was exactly like watching Sephie when hers flips,” Stephen said. “It was clear when it happened. I think everyone saw it, even.”

“It was impressive. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you two look that good in a practice match. When your life is really on the line, sure, but not when you know it’s a practice match,” Viktor said.

“They feel different to you?” Ivan asked.

“Yeah. You and Adrik are similar in that you’re both very chaotic with your anger. It’s controlled, but barely. Although, it’s becoming more so lately. Andrei is quiet and very controlled, but just as deadly. Misha’s might be my favorite, just because he delights in it. I can feel the f**kery increase with his anger,” I said, laughing.

Misha laughed loudly. “You knew I was trying to find a way to embarrass him as much as possible.”

“Yep. You both did, just in different ways. I’ve never been more proud,” I said.

Viktor, ever the proud older brother, said, “I don’t think those two will be a problem moving forward. They might quit after today.” His deep belly laugh filled the kitchen.

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Sephie

The guys left to get cleaned up, giving Adrik and I the penthouse to ourselves for a few more minutes before Aleksei and Vitally came back upstairs. I couldn't keep my hands off Adrik. Normally, it was the other way around, but seeing him in the ring with Ivan was an unexpected major turn on.

"I'm actually glad I figured out that I could push my anger onto Andrei and Misha because otherwise, I would've been left thinking about how f**king hot you are. I mean, they might agree, but I don't think any of them necessarily want to feel that," I said, pulling my shirt off before trying to pull his shorts off as I also tried to drag him toward the shower.

He laughed, his lips still against mine, his hands pulling at my clothes just as feverishly. He walked into the shower, turning the water on, then quickly came back to me. He grabbed me around the waist, pulling me to him roughly. "I might've felt it while I was in the ring. You're very good motivation." he said, turning me in his arms so my back was to his chest, his hands roughly squeezing and running over my breasts. He walked us into the shower, stopping just before he pressed me against the wall. His hands ran down both of my arms. He grabbed each of my hands and placed them on the wall in front of me. "You're going to need this," he said, as he grabbed my hips and pulled them back toward him so I was slightly bent over.

"Need it why?" I asked, trying to turn around to look at him. He caught me and put my hands back on the wall with one hand. The other hand slid down my back, in between my a ss cheeks to my slit.

"Because I'm going to f**k you," he said, removing his fingers from my pu ssy and slamming into me with his co ck. I moaned loudly, now grateful I had something to brace against. I pushed my hips back into him, already wanting more.

He grabbed my hips, his hands holding me firmly as he slammed into me repeatedly. My walls clenching down on him as he buried his c ock deep inside me. I pushed back on the wall, my hips meeting his each time he thrust into me. I couldn't contain the moans that escaped as I felt myself building to o*gasm. With each thrust, it felt harder to stand up as my body was nothing but pleasure. I felt his hand slide up my back, to the back of my neck. He grabbed a fistful of hair, pulling my head back as he thrust into me harder. I was breathing heavy, unable to quiet my screams of pleasure. I might not be able to walk later, but I still wanted more

"Harder," I managed to say in between trying to breathe and moaning in pleasure. I heard him groan as he readily obliged. He let go of my hair, but held onto the back of my neck as he pulled me to him each time he slammed Into me. I could do nothing but try to remain standing as he continued

to f**k me.

Finally, just when I thought I couldn't take anymore, I felt him find his release. He slammed into me one last time, exploding inside me. He wrapped his arms around me tightly, pushing me against the wall as we both worked to catch our breath.

He stood up, pulling us both back under the water. He kissed my neck gently. I was still struggling to catch my breath. I held onto his arms, my grip getting tighter the longer it took to slow my breathing.

He felt my panic start to set in as I couldn't catch my breath. He kept his arms around me tightly, holding me up. His lips next to my ear, he calmly said, "you're okay, solnishko. Listen to my voice. You're safe. You're with me. You can breathe." He kept repeating it over and over again until my breaths started to calm down slightly. My grip on his arms relaxed somewhat, but I didn't let go.

He turned me to face him, still quietly repeating his calming words, trying to help me relax so I could breathe normally. I finally took a deep breath, closing my eyes. I felt his hands on either side of my face and felt him press his lips to mine.

He started to say something, but I cut him off, without even opening my eyes. "Don't apologize for that. I very much enjoyed that," I said, smiling at

him.

He laughed. "I don't like that you can't catch your breath. I don't like feeling your fear so close to feeling your pleasure. Those two should not be connected," he said.

"I don't disagree," I said, resting my head on his chest.

"You had trouble catching your breath the other night too. Have you been having trouble other times?" he asked, his fingers massaging my scalp as he washed my hair.

"I don't think so. I haven't done that much though. It's easy to breathe when you're not doing anything strenuous."

He chuckled. "Then it's my fault for being too strenuous."

"But I like when you're strenuous. I need a nap now, but I love it," I said, finally opening my eyes to look at him.

"You need a nap because of me? That's not normal either, no matter how strenuous I get."

"Stop worrying about me. You're not going to break me," I said, reaching up to kiss him.

He clicked his tongue. "I'm going to have Andrei check to make sure you're okay. I don't like that you've struggled to catch your breath twice in a row. I still can't feel anything from your lung. I only feel your panic when you struggle to catch your breath," he said.

"I don't feel anything from my lung either. Except the panic when I can't catch my breath. You're not missing anything," I said. "I don't want you to worry that you're going to break me or be scared to touch me. I love it when you're strenuous when you f**k me," I said, grinning at him. I stood on my toes and ran my tongue slowly over his bottom lip as I su cked it into my mo uth.

He squinted his eyes at me. He pulled me close, kissing me passionately, but quickly. "What am I going to do with you…"

Adrik had meetings that afternoon. Vitaliy informed us that he also had meetings elsewhere in the city, so he wouldn't be back until the evening. "It's been so long since I've been in the city that everyone wants to see me when I'm here. It's partly why I never come to the city," he said. He sounded almost grumpy about having to go.

"You can tell them to f**k off, Vitally. You know that, right?" I said. I wanted to see what kind of reaction I could get out of him. "They're not the boss of you."

He laughed loudly. He pulled my arm through his, patting my hand. "If only everyone were as fun as you. I wouldn't mind meetings then."

"The world could not handle more than one of me, Vitaliy," I said, laughing. He surprised me by kissing my forehead. He simply smiled at me, telling. us all he would return, then walked out of the penthouse with Aleksei.

Once he left, Adrik looked at Andrei. "Sephie has had trouble catching her breath twice now in the last two days. The second time was worse than the first. I'm worried there's something wrong that she doesn't want to tell me about."

Andrei looked at me, almost like he was asking permission. I smiled at him. "It's okay, Bubba. You can look. If there's something wrong, then even I don't know about it."

He studied me for a few minutes. He went to speak, but stopped himself. He was quiet for another few minutes, then finally said, "her lung isn't as bad as when she had pneumonia, but it's not 100% either, but it's made worse because she has anxiety about it now. She's having small panic attacks when she has trouble catching her breath. That makes it harder to catch her breath. That's why you talking to her and repeating phrases to her helps calm her down. She's also still due for sleeping in, but she's fighting it because of everything going on."

"Have you had panic attacks before, Seph?" Stephen asked.

I shook my head no. "Not that I know of. I wouldn't have said me not being able to catch my breath was a panic attack though, so there's that."

"It's understandable. You've been through a lot recently. You're still processing everything," Viktor said.

Adrik was quietly contemplating everything, but he seemed mostly satisfied that I wasn't hiding anything from him or he wasn't missing anything on his own. I walked to him as he opened his arm for me. He pulled me to him, kissing my temple. "It appears it is my fault," he said quietly, with a smirk

on his face.

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Sephie

“Battista arrived last night. He wants to meet tomorrow. He made reservations at his favorite spot,” Vitaliy said during a lull in the conversation at

dinner.

“Please tell me his favorite spot is someplace fun, like the zoo,” I said.

Vitaliy laughed. “Net, but you might be able to talk him into it next time.”

“Da mmit. Missed opportunity,” I said, “Where’s his favorite spot? Although I can tell you right now, I’m not going to enjoy it as much as I would the

700.”

“He loves one restaurant at his hotel downtown. He always has important meetings there. But since he owns the place, he’s usually the only one in the restaurant for those meetings. It’s very convenient,” Vitaliy said.

“What hotel?”

“Same one Mr. Turner works at,” Ivan said.

“Oh, that hotel. Sh it. That means I have to wear heels. Yet another point for the zoo over this boring a ss hotel,” I said. “But my consolation prize is I’ll get to say hi to Mr. Turner.” I hadn’t been back to that hotel since the night of the ball. I couldn’t say I was looking forward to it.

While everyone was busy talking, Ivan caught me off to the side. “No one is leaving your side this time, princess. Especially not me. Especially not your go ddamn prince.”

“You’re getting very good at reading my emotions, Squish. Even when they’re not out of control yet.”

This one was easy, princess. I have the same fear as you do. There’s no way I’m letting what happened last time ever happen again. You won’t be alone at any point. Might make the bathroom situation awkward, but that’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make,” he said, grinning at me.

I laughed at him. “You’re my favorite, Squish. Don’t tell the others.”

It was quite the sight to behold when we arrived at the hotel the following day, Between the seven of us, plus Vitaliy and all of his security, you would’ve thought a foreign dignitary had arrived.

Mr. Turner, always happy to see us, was waiting to open the door as we walked up the steps. “Miss Sephie, you look beautiful as always,” he said, bowing his head slightly.

I stepped away from Adrik to give Mr. Turner a hug. “It’s good to see you, Mr. Turner. How are things today? Good? Quiet?”

“You know I love my quiet days, Miss Sephie.” Before he let me go, he whispered in my ear, “come see me when you can.” I nodded as discreetly as 1 could. Mr. Turner very rarely asked me to come see him, so I had a feeling he knew something he thought I should know. He winked at me as I stepped back to Adrik. “I’m glad to see you fine gentlemen taking care of her as usual,” he said, nodding to Adrik and the guys. He opened the door, stepping to the side for everyone to enter.

Once inside the hotel, Vitaliy looked at Adrik and I, somewhat surprised. “He used to be my neighbor. I’m nowhere near that friendly to just anybody.” I said, laughing at the relieved expression on Vitaliy’s face.

Battista was waiting on us in the restaurant. It was just as Vitaliy said it would be. The entire restaurant was empty, except us. Battista was around the same age as Vitaliy, maybe slightly younger. His alive skin and black hair gave him the appearance of a much younger man, bowever. Vitally greeted him as warmly as he was capable of. When Adrik stepped away from me to shake his hand, the guys all silently moved closer to me, effectively boxing me in. I smiled to myself.

L

There were two other people with Battista, which was unexpected, at least to me. He introduced the first one to Vitaliy. I watched as Vitaliy shook his hand, his cold smile on his face, like normal. The second person had gotten a phone call as were walking up, so she had stepped away just before we got to them. She had finished the call and was walking back to us. I noticed Ivan, who was standing partially in front of me suddenly stiffened. No sooner had 1 felt his unease and I felt his protective bubble go up around me. Since no one was necessarily paying attention to us yet, I grabbed his hand, asking quietly, “what’s going on?”

He squeezed my hand and turned to look at me. He looked shocked, but I could also see a flash of fear across his face before he got it under control. “Something’s happening. It’s different. I’m okay, but I might need you,” he said. I nodded my head, keeping my hand in his as he turned back toward Adrik, Vitaliy, and Battista.

I watched as Battista introduced the woman to Vitaliy. When Vitaliy shook her hand, I noticed the very quick look of shock flash across his face before it went back to cold and hard. Adrik noticed too, as he cut his eyes over to me before looking back at Battista as he introduced him to the woman.

Vitaliy turned toward me, motioning me to come and meet Battista. I looked at Ivan, silently asking if he would be okay without me for a moment. He nodded his head and let go of my hand. Adrik saw the exchange between us before I walked to his side. After I greeted everyone, he quickly searched my eyes to find out what had happened with Ivan. He raised an eyebrow, but said nothing as he gently pushed me back toward Ivan and the other guys. I grabbed Ivan’s hand as soon as I was partially behind him and Andrei once more. I felt him relax slightly, but he was definitely on high alert. There was something about the woman that he definitely didn’t like. I had a feeling that Vitaliy didn’t like it either, but I couldn’t exactly ask in front of everyone.

We sat down at a table that was large enough that Ivan could sit next to me. I kept my hand on his knee under the table the entire time. I’d only ever seen him like that when he was at the hospital, so it was unnerving that he was having this reaction now.

Since Vitaliy was with us this time, I wasn’t needed for translation purposes. It meant I could sit and observe everyone, which I was happy about. Adrik was happy about that as well. I could tell that Battista and Vitaliy had a good relationship. It was obvious that Vitaliy was at case with Battista. Adrik was too. The other man that was with Battista was quiet, but honest when he spoke. While Battista was loud and boisterous, his associate was quieter and almost shy. The woman was a little bit of a different story. She wasn’t quite as old as Vitaliy and Battista, but she was older than Adrik by at least a decade, if not more. It did not stop her from gazing longingly at him every chance she got. After his initial introduction, Adrik hadn’t even glanced at her, but she was almost fixated on him. She didn’t talk much, but when she did, she was fake. Very fake. I did not get a good feeling from her, but she wasn’t talking enough for me to figure out why I didn’t like her.

Every time she spoke, Ivan would tense. He would look away from her, even. It was starting to concern me. After they got the important business out of the way and the conversation turned to more meaningless subjects, I leaned over to Adrik. “I need to get Ivan out of here for at least a few minutes. He’s going to escort me to the bathroom. I could use Andrei too, if that isn’t going to cause too much of a scene.”

He nodded his head. He leaned in, a small smile on his face as he kissed me gently, his lips lingering on mine before I went to get up. He looked to Andrei and jerked his head slightly toward me as I stood up, excusing myself for a moment. Ivan was immediately by my side, as was Andrei. We walked quickly toward the restroom at the back of the restaurant.

Once we were away from everyone, I asked Ivan what was happening. “I’m not exactly sure, princess. But that woman, I can’t look at her. Does she look normal to you?” he asked. He sounded almost afraid when he asked me.

“I don’t get a good feeling from her, but I can’t figure out why. Have you gotten anything from her, Bubba?”

“Same as you. I don’t like her, but she’s not saying enough for me to figure out why I don’t. Why can’t you look at her, Ivan?” Andrei asked.

He was quiet for a minute, looking from me to Andrei nervously. “Squish, Bubba has known about your past longer than I have. He knows what happened to you. He heard you one night talking in your sleep. You can say whatever you need to say,” I said, grabbing his hand once again.

He looked almost relieved to know that Andrei knew about his past. “Part of the reason that I’m so haunted by the doctors that used to experiment on me is that their faces never looked normal to me. Princess, when you said that my demons pull other people’s demons out so the world can see them like I do, I’m not sure if you knew how accurate that statement is. I never saw the doctors’ faces. I saw the demons inside them. It’s only ever happened at the facility and I had written it off to being a kid and being tortured, but I’m seeing it in that woman out there.”

“You’re not the only one. Vitaliy gut something from her too. I saw his look when he shook her hand that meant something was off about her,” I said.

“Vitally is different too?” Andrei asked.

I smiled and nodded my head. “That’s why we told him about you and Misha. He felt it when he shook my hand. That’s how he’s special. He can feel if a person is good or bad when he touches them. We all feel different to him, for the record.”

“Must be where Boss gets it,” he said.

I glanced at Ivan. “What do you need to be able to make it through the rest of this meeting? I’ll fake an illness to get us out of here if I have to.”

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Sephie

“I’m not sure, princess. This has never happened before so I don’t know how to handle it. Your hand on me helps keep me grounded,” Ivan said.

“I can do that. Adrik knows something is happening. He’ll be able to get most of this conversation when we get back to the table without me saying anything. I’m hoping he can make the meeting shorter. I don’t want to have to look at her make bedroom eyes at my future husband any longer than I have to anyway,” I said.

Andrei laughed. “She’s worse than Giana about making it obvious.”

“Right? Is there no subtlety left in this world?” I asked. Before we walked back to the table, I pulled Ivan toward me. I wrapped my arms around his neck, knowing he was struggling to keep it together. “We’ll get out of here as soon as we can. You’re doing great and I’m proud of you,” I said. He held onto me tightly for a few moments before I felt his arms relax around me.

Andrei and Ivan both walked slightly in front of me as we walked back to the tables. I had a hold of Ivan’s hand still. I was mostly lost in my own head, thinking about Ivan and how to help him when I felt his grip on my hand tighten. I looked up, snapped back to reality.

The woman was sitting in my chair, turned toward Adrik, talking to him quietly. Adrik had leaned as far away from her as he could without falling off his chair. He was forced to look at her, but would only glance at her before looking away, I said to Ivan and Andrei, “get behind me. hand on my back, I need to let go.”

Ivan put your

We still had some distance before we were back at the table, so they moved instantly behind me and I felt Ivan’s hand on the small of my back. I crossed my arms over my chest as we walked the last few steps to the table. We were walking behind the woman and Adrik, so while he knew we were there, she still hadn’t seen us.

1 cleared my throat as I stopped behind my chair this woman was siting in. She continued talking to Adrik like she didn’t hear me, so I cleared my throat louder this time. She finally glanced at me but didn’t make a move to get up. I could feel everyone’s eyes on me, but I was so angry at her blatant disregard for my presence that I didn’t care. As she was talking to Adrik, 1 could hear the thoughts in her head. I could also feel the hatred she had for me. She was doing this on purpose.

I looked at Vitaliy, then to Battista. In Italian, I said loud enough that everyone could hear me, “Battista, do you always surround yourself with such ill-mannered women, or you brought her special for us? If you did, I’d like to thank you. It’s been quite some time since I’ve had the chance to make another woman cry.”

Vitaliy couldn’t contain his laughter. Even Battista looked amused. The woman stopped talking to Adrik, noticing everyone looking at her. She finally made a move to stand up. When she turned around to look at me, I felt Ivan’s hand press into my back at the same time I felt his bubble go up around me. When she looked at me, I saw exactly what Ivan saw. It wasn’t her face that I saw. It was something entirely different and not exactly human.

As she turned to walk back to her original seat, she looked at me with every bit of hatred she could muster. It was very much the same feeling that I had when Sal and Armando looked at me when they took me and Ivan. I didn’t like it. I felt the panic start, but I pushed my anger to the surface as much as possible, trying to override the panic. Ivan and Andrei both caught on to what I was doing and I felt their anger feed into mine. The panic was pushed down and I was able to hold her gaze until she looked away.

As she moved to walk past me, I said in Italian, so only she could hear, “try to touch him again and you will no longer have functioning hands.”

She didn’t respond, but she walked very quickly to her original seat. I graciously sat back down with as pleasant of a smile on my face as I could muster. Adrik moved his chair closer to me, so I could still keep a hand on Ivan. He stretched his arm across my lap, leaning over to kiss me in front of everyone. I had to admit to feeling ecstatic when I looked at her and saw her red face at seeing him give me affection.

Battista and Vitaliy had been quietly conversing while this was happening. Vitally caught my eye, winking at me. The woman was much quieter for the rest of the meeting, but would still interject occasionally. Her little stunt seemed to irritate Battista, as he was much colder to her for the rest of the meeting. Before, he would let her talk and seemed to take her opinion into account. After, he was very dismissive of her and would interrupt her frequently.

Ivan managed to hold it together, as long as I could keep a hand on him. I was anxious for the meeting to end so I could tell him that I saw what he saw. I was curious if Andrei could also see it. The woman still took every opportunity to look at Adrik, but he never took his hand off my lap and he made sure to look at me more often than normal. He practically didn’t look at anyone else the rest of the time.

When the meeting finally came to a close and everyone stood up to leave, I felt his arm around my waist, pulling me as close to him as possible. I made sure that she saw it. Adrik walked to Battista, shaking his hand, never letting go of me. The guys were close behind us. Battista stepped closer to us, taking my hand. He turned it over, kissing the back of my hand as he said in Italian quietly, “you’ve done me a huge favor today. I’m in your debt.” He smiled warmly at me as he stepped back and went back to talking to Vitaliy,

While Vitaliy and Battista continued to talk, Adrik looked at his watch. I knew he didn’t have anymore meetings scheduled today, but he still told them he needed to get back for one. They both nodded, both of them smiling at me as we turned to leave. I caught her staring at us one last time as we turned to walk away from everyone. I felt Adrik’s hand slide down to my a ss as we walked away. I could barely keep my laughter in until we were out of the restaurant,

“You’re just as savage as I am now. I f**king love it.”

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Sephie

As soon as we were safely in the penthouse, I stopped Ivan and hugged him again. He was much more relaxed after leaving the hotel, but I knew he was still completely unnerved by what had happened. He wrapped his giant arms around me tightly, picking me up for a few moments. He just stood there, my feet dangling, holding onto me as he slowly calmed himself down.

When he set me down, I said, “I saw what you saw.” I quickly looked at Andrei. “Did you see anything when she finally got her ass out of my chair and turned to look at me?”

“I saw her extreme hatred for you, if that’s what you mean,” Andrei said.

I looked at Ivan’s shocked face. “She didn’t look human,” I said.

Andrei started to put it together. “That’s why you panicked when she looked at you.”

I nodded my head. Misha, always curious, said, “okay, you guys are going to have to explain what the hell happened. I also want to know what you said to Battista to get that woman out of your chair.”

Before I answered him, I asked, “did you get anything from her, Misha?”

He nodded his head, emphatically. “I was insanely nauseous the entire time we were there. But only when looking at her.”

Before I could speak, Ivan moved to lean against the counter in the kitchen. He looked at everyone, sighed, then said, “when I was a kid, my mom sent me to a research facility where they did horrible experiments on me because of my inability to feel pain. She didn’t know that would happen. They gave her some other story and promised to send my siblings to school. My dad had died shortly after my youngest brother was born, so she was trying to raise four kids on her own and she agreed. She thought I would be taken care of. The reason that hospitals f**k me up is because I’m reliving what they did to me in there every single time. It wasn’t just physical torture. They tried to break me. They tried to turn me into a monster and they enjoyed it.”

As he was talking, I hopped up on the counter next to him. I hooked my arm through his and rested my head on his shoulder. I felt him squeeze my arm as he continued talking.

“When Sephie told you all that my demons pull other people’s demons out so the world can see them as I do, she didn’t know how accurate she was. When I was at the facility, I never saw the doctors’ real faces. I saw the demons inside them. That’s why I’m so haunted by it and why I fight so hard anytime I have to go to the hospital. I’m trying to kill the doctors, but they keep coming back. I can’t see whoever is in front of me. I only see the demons’ faces from that facility.”

I glanced around the room at everyone’s shocked faces. Ivan continued, “that woman at the hotel today. I saw the same thing with her that I saw with the doctors. As soon as she walked up to introduce herself to Vitaliy, I saw it.”

“Vitaliy saw something, too. I caught his look when he touched her,” Adrik said.

“I saw it when she stood up to get the f**k out of my chair,” I said. They all laughed at my irritation.

“What did you say to Battista, gazelle?” Misha asked.

I giggled. “I asked him if he always surrounded himself with such ill-mannered women or if he brought her special for us. Then I said if he did, I needed to thank him because it’s been a really long time since I made another woman cry.”

They all laughed. Ivan slid his arm around my shoulders, hugging me to his side. “What about when she turned to leave? You said something else to her that nobody else caught,” Ivan said.

I cut my eyes to him, unable to hide my smile. “I told her if she tries to touch Adrik again that she will no longer hase functioning hands.”

They all erupted in even louder laughter than the first time.

“What did Battista say to you before we left?” Adrik asked.

“That’s where it gets even more interesting. He told me I did him a huge favor and that he’s in my debt now,” I said.

“His attitude toward that woman changed after you put her in her place,” Stephen said. “I don’t know what they were saying, but he was very dismissive of her after it happened when he wasn’t before.”

“I noticed that too,” I said.

“She was worse than Giana about staring, though.” Misha said.

Andrei snapped his fingers and pointed to Misha. “Same.”

Adrik scoffed. “I don’t even know how you knew she tried to touch me because it happened while you were gone, but it made me sick.”

I hopped off the counter and walked to Adrik, clearly feeling his disgust. I couldn’t help but love him a little more for it. I wrapped my arms around his waist. “I f**king love you,” I said as I rested my head against his shoulder.

“I think there’s more to that woman being there today than we know about, especially considering what Battista said to Sephie before we left,” Viktor

said.

“We definitely need to have this conversation with Vitaliy when he gets back. I know he knows something about her that he couldn’t say in front of everyone.” Adrik said.

“I just want to point out how convenient it is that you’re so good at reading my mind now. I didn’t have to tell you Ivan was unnerved. I was planning on letting you figure out why he was unnerved when we got back, but that heifer put a hold on those plans.”

Adrik pulled me closer. “You’re adorable when you get all bitchy,” he said, kissing my temple.

The guys took advantage of Adrik’s mostly free afternoon while we waited on Vitaliy to make it back to the penthouse. They all took care of little things they’d been putting off because of more important tasks. Adrik had some work in his office to get done, so I went with him so the guys could! come and go as needed.

I stretched out on the couch, suddenly exhausted from everything the past few days. I tried to stay awake, but inevitably fell asleep. Since Ivan and 1 were taken, I hadn’t fallen asleep once without someone next to me. I wasn’t even sure it was possible anymore.

It was possible. It happened.

I wasn’t sure how long I’d been asleep when I felt Adrik’s warm hands on me, gently shaking me awake. “Solnishko, you were having a bad dream. I need you to wake up.”

I was somewhat startled awake and immediately worried I’d been talking in my sleep. “Shit. Was I talking?”

He smiled sweetly at me, his warm hand resting against my cheek. “You were mumbling, but I could see the shaking from across the office. Andrei is on his way back so you can go back to sleep on him. You are overdue for sleeping in. It took you two seconds to fall asleep when you laid down.”

“At least I wasn’t yelling this time,” I said, sitting up.

Andrei walked in, looking somewhat concerned, but he relaxed when he saw me awake and talking to Adrik. “Spider monkey. I’m surprised you even fell asleep without anyone next to you. I didn’t think that was a thing you could do anymore.”

“I didn’t either, Bubba. You were right, apparently. I am overdue for sleeping in. I’m really tired,” I said.

“Being bitchy always makes you tired,” Adrik said, grinning at me. He stood up, leaning down to kiss my forehead. “Go back to sleep, love. Andrei can keep you warm. I just have a few more things to finish up and we can go back upstairs.”

Andrei sat down at the end of the couch, stretching one leg out along the back of the couch, opening his arms for me. I curled up in his arms, resting my head on his almost warm enough chest and was asleep again in a matter of minutes.

Author’s Note: Thank you all for sticking with this story for this long. I love reading all the comments and watching the story unfold through different eyes. I try to respond to all the comments, but please know that I read them all, even if I don’t respond. Thank you so much for loving my characters as much as I

do!

374

Sephte

When I woke again, I was in the penthouse. I knew I was laying on Adrik now instead of Andrei without even opening my eyes. I could feel Adrik’s perfect warmth against me. I started to stir and felt his arms hold me tighter.

“Mmm, I still love when you hold me down as I wake up,” I said. I could feel the vibration of his quiet laugh in his chest. I looked up at him. “You moved me and I didn’t wake up?” I asked, realizing I was no longer in the office.

I heard Andrei laugh from one of the other couches. “You were completely out, spider monkey.”

“We’d all been talking for like half an hour, thinking you’d wake up. You never did, so Andrei carried you up here and handed you off to Boss,” Misha said.

“Guess I really am overdue,” I said. I looked around to see if Vitaliy and Aleksei were back yet.

“They’ll be here soon. Along with dinner,” Viktor said.

It was that moment that I realized how late it had gotten and that it was now dark outside. “Shit,” I said, under my breath.

“You need a break, Seph. Don’t feel bad,” Stephen said. “You’re always extra tired when new stuff happens. You’ve had multiple new things happen lately.”

I looked at Andrei, then to Ivan. “That reminds me. I forgot to ask if you two knew you were pushing your anger to me when I was fighting to keep the panic at bay at the hotel.”

Andrei nodded his head. “I could feel you panic but then I felt you get angry and figured out what you were trying to do. I had no idea how to do it, but I tried to push mine to you. I know you can deal with insane amounts of anger, but you struggle with the panic and fear. I was hoping the anger would override everything else.”

“You’re so smart and so handsome. It’s like you’re a double threat,” I said.

“It was a little different for me. Your anger amps mine up to the point that it’s all I notice. I felt yours getting stronger, which made mine get stronger. I think it was having the same effect on me as it was you because it calmed my nerves when looking at her,” Ivan said. “It was a welcome change.”

“That’s different,” I said, chewing on my bottom lip. “I felt your bubble too, Squish. A couple of times.”

“Have you learned how to keep your demon eyes under control, Seph? I was sitting across from you and I didn’t see them once when you were talking to her. I was incredibly impressed,” Stephen asked. We hadn’t had a chance to fill him and Viktor in on my mood ring eyes yet.

“She’s been wearing contacts since we went to Panama. Her eyes have a mind of their own now. The demon eyes aren’t the only trick she can do now, but she has problems controlling it. Since we were all a little punchy after Trino’s guys had such a problem with her, Boss had contacts made for her so she wouldn’t have to worry about anyone seeing and we wouldn’t have to kill anyone,” Ivan said. He had his devilish grin on his face.

“What else are they doing, sestrichka?” Viktor asked.

“It’s easier if I show you. Be right back,” I said, running to the bathroom to take the contacts out. When I came back out, they’d all moved to the kitchen, where there was better lighting.

I walked to Adrik, knowing how much he loved seeing my eyes change to blue. The smile on his face told me they had changed. He called Viktor and Stephen over so they could see.

“Her demon eyes started as the brown overtaking the other colors and turning darker. Now it’s to the point that they’re black when it happens. The other colors started doing it now too whenever she feels different emotions. Blue means she’s thinking about how much she loves me. Green means she’s being a shit and sarcastic,” Adrik said.

“Now that we’re all here, I want to see the white,” Misha said. He was always the instigator and I loved him for it.

“White?” Stephen asked.

I nodded. “When I get scared, they turn almost white. There’s just a hint of blue still, but it’s mostly white. The other day when the Wonder Twins asked me about my demon eyes, I showed them the other colors but I didn’t want to show them the white because Ivan feels me panic and you guys were gone to get Vitaliy. I didn’t want to distract him. We haven’t tested it to see how far away it works, but my panic and fear are very strong so he and Adrik get punched with it when it happens.”

“It’s scarier than her demon eyes when it happens,” Adrik said.

Viktor laughed, the uncertainty evident in his deep voice when he said, “I’m not sure I want to see that, then. I’m still trying to get a handle on your demon eyes when that happens.”

“Aww, Papa Bear. It’s never directed at you. You’re my favorite,” I said, smiling sweetly at him.

“I don’t want to freak you out and make you panic, but I’m definitely curious,” Stephen said.

I looked at Adrik, who looked concerned. “You don’t have to show them. You struggle to control your fear. I don’t want you to be overwhelmed, but I will be right here to calm you down if you need it,” he said.

I chewed on my bottom lip for a moment, then said, “I have an idea.” I stepped in front of him, pulling his arms around my waist. “You always help so maybe you can keep it from getting out of control, but still let me feel it enough that they can see.” He wrapped his arms around my waist tighter, leaning down and resting his chin on my shoulder, I closed my eyes, taking a deep breath. I started to replay the afternoon’s events in my head when that woman stood up and looked at me. It didn’t take long and I felt his grip on me tighten as we both felt my panic coming on.

Ivan stood up a little straighter, followed by Misha and Andrei. “It’s working,” they all said at the same time.

I opened my eyes to see Stephen’s shocked expression. It worked. Misha and Andrei also walked closer so they could see. Viktor couldn’t help himself and also walked closer to see. They were speechless. I could feel my panic starting to grow stronger as I looked at their shocked faces in front of me.

I felt Adrik’s lips close to my ear. “You’re with me, love. You’re safe. We all love you.” He just kept repeating those words until he felt me start to relax.

I finally took a deep breath. I had closed my eyes when he started talking to me. Their shocked expressions had an unexpected affect on me, so when I opened my eyes, they were the almost amber that meant I was sad. Adrik felt the shift. They all saw the new color before he turned me around.

“Why are you sad, spider monkey?” Andrei asked as I hid my face in Adrik’s chest.

“So that color brown means she’s sad?” Stephen asked. “That’s different than her normal brown.”

Adrik nodded his head. “I’ve only ever seen that amber color once before. When she was thinking about Trino seeing his mom for the last time,” he said. He gently put his hand on the back of my neck, pulling me away from him so he could search my eyes. He cursed under his breath, pulling me back to him. “We love you no matter what, Sephie. That’s never going to change.”

I heard Andrei quietly explain to the others and I knew he had done his own searching. “She doesn’t want to scare us with everything that’s happened. She doesn’t want us to look at her differently, either. She’s sad at the thought of us feeling uncomfortable around her now.”

We heard the door to the penthouse open, signaling that Vitaliy and Aleksei were back. Adrik kept his arms around me, but walked us quickly back to the bedroom. Once we were alone, he stepped back from me, looking me in the eyes. “They were just shocked. The white eyes are scarier than the demon eyes the first time you see them. They still love you as much as they ever have, Sephie. Nothing is going to change that.”

I nodded my head, but didn’t say anything. I walked to the bathroom so I could put the contacts back in. He followed me, standing in his favorite spot behind me, his chin once again resting on my shoulder while he watched me put the contacts in. It had become one of my favorite things. It was such a simple thing, but I found myself loving the little moments we had together.

375

Adri

Sephie still felt slightly upset, but she was trying to smile through it. She turned toward me after putting her contacts back in, smiling sweetly up at me. She reached up and pressed her lips to mine. “I love you.” the said as the grabbed my hand to walk back to the kitchen.

The guys were still in the kitchen as Sephir lest me back out. They looked concerned, but I could tell that she smiled at them an i soften. Vitalis and Aleksei were standing with them. Sephie didn’t waste any time. “Vitaliy, what did you feel when you thook that woman’s hand

all of their faces

today”

He looked surprised, but there was also an air of amusement. “It’s good to see you

he said, a shy smile across his face.

ms question and I’ll lawn over you, but not before. I saw your react when you touched her,” she said, crossing her arms across her chest. The guys were struggling to not laugh

Vitaliy chuckled, but answered her question. “She’s very evil. Battista ows of my ability. Occasionally, he brings people for my approval. She was one that he was seeking approval on,” he said.

“Then why did he tell me that I did him a huge favor and he’s in my debt now before we left?” she asked

“Because you gave him a valid reason to get rid of her quickly. They’ve been working on a few small things together and it’s gone well, but he said he’s never felt completely comfortable with her. He just didn’t know why. That’s when he usually seeks out my services. She’s very influential with a few other business associates of Battista’s, so he can’t just cut ties with her without a valid reason. You’ve given him a valid reason. He may be a womanizer and he might openly flirt with women, but never in the disrespectful manner that she did today. He knows his boundaries. She clearly did not, but vou did an excellent job of reminding her, sladkaya,” he said, laughing. “What did you tell her when she got up**

“That if she ever tried to touch him again, she would no longer have functioning hands.” Sephir said, her arms still folded across her chest. She was clearly still irritated with her.

Vitaliy and Aleksei both looked surprised, but both laughed at Sephie’s words. She moved to lean against the counter, chewing on her bottom lip. *Vitaliy, ow does your ability work? Is it a black or wh ite situation? Or do you feel like levels of good and evil?” she asked.

“It’s more nuanced than black and wh ite. Like I said before, some people are ruled by good, some by evil. But there’s also what they’re doing about it. I can feel that too. Some people fight against the evil and ultimately end up being very good people. Some people are ruled by good, but still choose eval for whatever reason. It depends on the person. This woman today, though. There was no good in her,” he said.

Sephie looked at Ivan, silently asking if he was okay to tell Vitaliy what happened. He nodded once. “Ivan and I saw her demon. She’s completely consumed by it,” she said.

Italty raised his eyebrow. “How?”

Septur und, “we’re still not entirely sure. It’s happened to Ivan before today, but it was rare. It’s never happened to me before.” She suddenly looked at like she’d made a connection. “It might’ve happened with me because your hand was on me. Like I borrowed it fro (you same as I do Misha.”

Vitaliy looked at Ivan. “You can see the face of evil?”

Ivan shrugged his shoulders. “It hasn’t happened in so long that I’d invinced myself I was imagining it when it happened before. I wa happened before.”

kid when it

“When you were at the facility?” he asked, Ivan looked surprised, then turned to look between me and Sephie. Vitaliy quickly added, “I figured it out. They told me nothing other than you were incapable of feeling pain and you had a hatred for doctors. I’d heard stones of the facility for years. Your inability to feel pain was highly sought after in Russia years ago You shu t the program down the night you escaped, for the record. You scared them.”

Ivan looked stunned. Sephie went to him, sliding her arm around his waist. He put his arm around her shoulders, pulling her to him. He kissed the top of her head, saying, “thank you. I needed to know that.” He looked back to Vitaliy. “When I was at the facility. I never saw the doctor’s faces. It was always their demons. It’s why I’m so haunted by it, even still. It hasn’t happened since I got out, so I just convinced myself was a traumatized kid. But then as soon as that woman turned toward me today. I could clearly see it on her. Sephie saw it later.” He still had his arm around Sephie as he

talked. She quietly stood next to him, happy to be his anchor.

Vitaliy thought for a few minutes, then looked at Andrei and Misha before looking at me. “Did you three get anything from her today?”

“I was nauseous every time I looked at her. That’s how I know something is going to go very badly,” Misha said.

“I didn’t get anything good from her. I didn’t like her, but she didn’t talk enough for me to be able to figure out why I didn’t like her,” Andrei said.

“She made me si ck when she tried to touch me,” I said.

Vitaliy looked at me, both eyebrows raised. “Does that happen often?”

I shook my head no. “Only twice that I can think of and only since I met Sephie. Both times were other women trying to touch me. There was one time a woman at a bar touched me and it was not as extreme of a reaction. I didn’t like it, but she didn’t make me si ck. The other two made me si ck. Almost to the point of anger both times.”

For once, Vitaliy smiled at someone other than Sephie. “That’s how it started for me. I was about your age when it started, too,” he said. “It started with women other than your mother. I couldn’t stand for them to touch me. It was very intermittent when it first started, but it started to get more prevalent. Then it started happening with everyone. The more I paid attention to it, the more precise it got. You, though. You’ve always felt different to me, I could always feel something from you, even before I could from other people. From the first time I held you as a newborn, I could feel you were special. I’d never found anyone else that felt like you until you brought Sephie to me.”

“And then you found out he brought you five more. You have a very generous son, Vitaliy,” Sephie said, grinning at him.

Vitaliy nodded his head, agreeing with her and unable to hide his smile.

“I think your math is off slightly, Seph,” Stephen said.

Vitally looked at him, seriously. “She speaks no lies. You feel the same as the rest of them. I don’t randomly put my hand on your shoulder because I’m a warm and fuzzy guy, Stephen. I didn’t believe her at first either, so I checked. All of you. You’re all the same.”

Stephen and Viktor looked at Sephie, the surprise clearly written on their faces. She couldn’t help but laugh. “You both have something special about you, but you’re very timid about believing it. We don’t know what it is until you start to believe it for yourselves. It’s also not an absolute guarantee that you’ll figure it out in this lifetime, which is just fine. You’ll figure it out in your own time, on your own terms. This is a lot to take in for all of us. You’re both dealing with your own things on top of everything else. There’s no time limit on any of this. It will happen when you’re ready,” she said.

They were both quiet for a few minutes, mulling over what she’d just said. Stephen’s phone beeped, to indicate dinner had arrived. He finally looked up at Sephie. “Vlad is going to be so pi ssed that I kept this from him for this lung,” he said, as he stood up to go downstairs.

We all laughed as once again Vitaliy and Aleksei were left confused at just who this Vlad person was and why he would be pi ssed at Stephen. I found myself loving Sephie a little more for her random silliness that gave us so many of these moments now. I never wanted her to stop.

376

Adrik

I woke the next morning before Sephie. I fully expected her to stay asleep. She was so tired last night, even after she slept most of the afternoon, that she fell asleep in under two minutes. She was laying across my chest in her favorite spot, her fingers lightly playing on my chest. I ran my hand through her curls, causing her to snuggle into me more. I continued to run my hand over her body, loving the quiet moments I got with her.

“Good morning,” she said quietly, without moving.

“I didn’t expect you to wake up with me this morning. You can go back to sleep, love. I know you’re exhausted,” I said, my fingers playing with her curls.

“I feel bad sleeping when your father is here. Feels tude,” she said, finally picking her head up and looking at me.

“He won’t care, Sephie. He’s not the boss of you,” I said, grinning at her.

Her smile stretched across her face. “Somehow I don’t think he’s going to stay in the city for too long. He’s very grumpy about having to meet with people he hasn’t seen in years. I think there’s a reason he hasn’t seen them in years, but they clearly can’t take the hint.”

“He’s still considerably less grumpy than I’ve ever seen him before, since he met you,” I said.

“It’s because I know he’s a cheeseball and he’s trying to be extra nice so I don’t tell everyone else he’s a cheeseball,” she said, climbing over me to get out of bed.

“Have you called him that yet?”

“No, not yet. I haven’t found the right moment yet, but I will. I’m looking forward to it,” she said, looking back at me grinning ear-to-ear as she walked in the bathroom. “What’s your schedule like today?” she called from the bathroom.

“Light. I have a few meetings, but they should be short. Neal is the last meeting. We’re finishing up removing Armando and Ricardo from the building project. He’ll be happy to see you, if you want to stop by,” I said.

“That might work out. I forgot to tell you that Mr. Turner wants me to come see him. He whispered it to me yesterday when I hugged him. He very rarely asks me to come see him, so I know he has something he needs to tell me. He always works the early shift, so he’ll be home by early afternoon, she said, walking out of the bathroom as she was putting her hair up on top of her head. My breath caught as I watched her walking around in nothing but my shirt, her hair messy from the night before. She caught me staring at her, still in bed. She walked back to me, climbing on top of me. She hadn’t put her contacts in yet, so her eyes changed to blue right away, making me smile.

“What? You’re beautiful in the momings,” I said as she was silently giving me a hard time for staring at her.

She gave me her heart-stopping smile as she held my face in both her hands. She leaned in and kissed me sweetly. “I love you, you know.”

The few meetings I had went by quickly. I was looking forward to the meeting with Neal at the end of the day. I was anxious to get Armando and Ricardo off the building project so it could continue to move forward. I didn’t need either one of them to make the project happen. I brought Armando on as a courtesy. At the time, I still believed he was loyal to me and was going to reward him for it. Once I found out his loyalty was in question, I had them start the process of removing him from the project.

That process was going to be finalized today. Neal was bringing the paperwork to the office for me to look over and sign. What Sephie didn’t realize yet was that I replaced Armando with her on the project. I had discussed it with Neal first, as he was a close business associate that I’d been partnering with for years. He was very happy with that idea. “She’s got more business sense in her little finger than Armando does in his entire body. I’ve never met someone so successful and yet so dumb in my entire life. I don’t understand how he’s stayed in business this long. But she’s clearly just getting started,” Neal had said when I brought it up to him. “If we bring her on for no other reason than her marketing and persuasion skills, it’ll be worth it. He laughed. “She has a unique way with words.”

Neal didn’t know why I wanted Armando and Ricardo off the project, but he also knew well enough to not ask. He did an excellent job of keeping the legal businesses and the illegal ones separate. He’d made a significant amount of money with me over the years, so he never said a word about the darker side of my business dealings. Even still, he seemed relieved to not be working with Armando any longer.

He walked into my office promptly at 4. We ran through the paperwork, discussing a few changes. “There are no traces of Armando or Ricardo on any of the documents for this project any longer. Sephie is also now a partner on the project, as you requested. I just need her signature on the few places that are marked in red. Once that’s complete, it’ll be official. We’re breaking ground on the first of next month. We’ve still got a few contractors to find and hire, but there’s time to do so before they’re needed,” Neal said.

“I have a guy. He does great work. He’s only got a small crew though, but he’s very dependable. I’ll send you his information. You won’t be disappointed if you use him,” I said.

Neal nodded. “That’ll save me a huge amount of time trying to find someone else.”

We were discussing a few more random details on the project, when Sephie walked into the office, followed by Ivan and Andrei. Neal stood to greet her, extending his hand to her. “Sephie, it’s good to see you again. How have you been?”

“Hi, Neal. I’m good. You?” she said, taking his hand.

“I’m good. I need your signature while you’re here. Then we can get this paperwork filed and official by the end of the day today. That’ll make me very happy,” he said.

Sephie looked at me, surprised. “Um, why do you need my signature on anything?”

Neal looked to me, surprised. He wasn’t aware that I hadn’t told her yet. I smirked at him. “You’re replacing Armando and Ricardo on the building project,” I said, enjoying the look of surprise on her face.

“Um, why am I replacing them? I don’t know anything about business!”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Sephie. You know more than you give yourself credit for. You’re the reason we have all the restaurant space leased out before we’ve even broken ground on the project. I’m pretty sure if we put you in charge of the marketing for the office space and apartments, those numbers would also jump to 100%,” Neal said.

“But…” she was too stunned to be able to argue. She was cute when she was speechless. I just smiled, holding a pen up for her as Neal flipped through the paperwork finding the places she needed to sign.

“No buts. Just sign,” I said, winking at her.

She squinted her eyes at me, but walked over and took the pen from me. Neal pointed out each section she needed to sign. They were done in a matter of minutes and the paperwork was finally official. My plan to completely erase Armando from history was one step closer to completion.

377

Adrik

After Neal left, I turned to Sephie, who was still mostly in shock. I just pulled hier in my lap. I knew I'd made the right decision. She would figure it out eventually, once she got over her surprise. It was also a guarantee that she'd come to more of my meetings. I wasn't mad at that.

"Did you see Mr. Turner?" I asked, brushing a stray curl from her face.

She nodded, still chewing on her bottom lip. She glanced at Ivan and Andrei, then looked back at me. "You know he knows just about every influential person in the city, because they all eventually come to the hotel for business. He overhears everything, too. He's also said it never fails to surprise him how freely people will talk in front of him, like he's not even there. We used to joke about it when I was still working at the restaurant," she said.

"Who did he overhear this time?" I asked, my hand rubbing her back lightly.

"He said the mayor was at the hotel a week or two ago. He was talking about replacing the police commissioner, Henry, as he left the hotel. If he gets re-elected, of course. Then, he said that Henry was at the hotel with a few other police chiefs a few days after the mayor and they were talking about how to prove the mayor is in Sal's pocket. He said a few of the police chiefs were sure they had enough evidence to prove the mayor was di rty. But then he said two of those police chiefs were back at the hotel, with the mayor, like three days after that. He didn't hear anything that time, but he said it looked very suspicious, given what everyone was talking about the first time around," she said.

I looked to Ivan. "Does he know the police chiefs?"

He nodded his head. "He said he can't remember one of their names, but he recognized him. He gave me the name of the other one."

Andrei added, "he's also nervous. I've never seen him nervous before, so I might've snooped. One of the police chiefs that met with the mayor saw him walking into the building one afternoon. He was walking down the street. Mr. Turner was sure he recognized him and he watched him walk in. He thinks he's been followed a few times since."

"You still have guys on him, correct?" I asked Ivan.

He nodded his head. "He still doesn't know. I was going to talk to Viktor and add more in the morning. It's possible he's noticing our guys following him now because he's nervous. Once we see what the extra guys can find, we'll know if he's really being followed or if he just now noticed our guys on him."

"You've had him followed this whole time?" Sephie asked.

I chuckled. "I assigned guys to him when he moved here, just in case. We had him watched after you left your apartment, but I assigned a regular team to him once he moved here."

"Why?"

"Because I knew you were fond of him and that he'd always watched over you when you lived at your apartment," I said, smiling at her confusion..

"You did that? Really?"

"Of course, solnishko. It would make you very unhappy if something were to happen to him. I'd like to prevent that."

Her beautiful smile crept across her face. "I love you," she sighed as she put her head on my shoulder.

"I think it's worth calling Henry. I can take the files on the police chiefs back down to him so we know who the second one is that met with the mayor. If Henry is trying to build a case against the mayor, he's not going to gut very far if those two know everything," Ivan said.

"Find out who the second one is. I want to know what areas they're in, too, along with any other information we have on them. Then I'll call Henry," I

said.

Ivan nodded. Both he and Andrei stood up, walking out of the office to gather the information. Sephie was fidgeting with my collar, her fingers lightly

running up and down my neck. I closed my eyes, leaning my head back, enjoying a moment with her.

"Long day?" she asked.

"Not bad. Just stressed. The information we got from Battista so far doesn't make me happy. I'm still irritated about that whole meeting, but most importantly, I'm worried about you."

"Why? I'm okay," she said, lifting her head from my shoulder so she could look at me.

"Mostly. I know you're fighting sleeping. It's starting to show."

Her brow furrowed. "Did I do something? Did I zone out again?"

I chuckled. "No, love. You're just darker. Your light dims when you're exhausted. It's becoming visible. At least to me."

She leaned her head back on my shoulder. "Maybe I am a little tired," she said, her fingers returning to my neck.

"Which is why you should stop fighting sleeping in," I said, holding her tighter.

"You're not the boss of me," she said, as she snuggled in closer to me. I heard her giggle softly.

The guys came back to the office a short time later. Sephie was still in my lap, lazily talking about random things. When they walked in, she realized. what time it was and went to get up. "I should go upstairs. I'm hungry. I'm sure you're all hungry, too."

Viktor smiled his sweet smile that was reserved only for her. "Sephie, I already ordered food. You're tired. You need a break from taking care of us."

"Told you," I said, pulling her back to me.

"I don't know how I feel about you all having such excellent observation skills now," she said, resting her head on my shoulder once more.

"It's your fault. You only have yourself to blame, gazelle. You brought it out of us," Misha said, trying to be serious, but failing miserably.

"Accountable," she said, giggling at him without even looking at him.

378

Adrik

When I woke the following morning, Sephie was curled up next to me under the covers. I pulled her back against me, but she didn't move. Finally. Instead of trying to wake her up, I kissed the back of her shoulder and got out of bed as quietly as I could. I was worried that she would start to shake once I left, so I stayed close. Luckily, she was wearing pants for once as she was cold last night when we went to bed, so I could move her to one of the guys if needed.

I took the quickest shower possible and got dressed. I didn't hear her talking, but when I walked back to the bed, I could see her shaking. It wasn't bad yet, but she was just starting to mumble as well. A quick text to Andrei and I scooped her up, carrying her to the couch.

It didn't take long for Andrei to come upstairs. He stretched out on the couch, happy he could sleep a little longer too. "I'm so happy she finally did this. I'm so f**king tired," he said.

I raised my eyebrow at him as 1 laid her next to him. "More so than usual?" Lasked.

He nodded his head. "Feels like I got run over by a bus. It started after we were at the hotel. I haven't recovered yet."

That made sense. "New level for you. It always makes her extra tired. Same thing happened to Misha. The only one I haven't seen it affect yet is Ivan," I said. As soon as Sephie was lying next to Andrei, her body started to relax and she curled up next to him. She hugged his arm as he tucked the blanket in around her. It was, in short, adorable. Even if I was jealous that he got to stay with her and not me. "She's likely going to sleep until noon, so take advantage of it. I'll keep everyone as quiet as possible," I said. Andrei just nodded his head, looking grateful.

I motioned for the other guys to be quiet when they walked in. Aleksei and Vitaliy walked out of their rooms at the same time. No one had seen Andrei on the couch with Sephie yet.

"Sephie finally lost her battle with sleeping in. She's on the couch with Andrei. I tried to leave her in bed, but she was shaking and starting to mumble by the time I got ready. He's experiencing new level fatigue anyway. It works out for both of them," I said.

Vitally looked curious. "You let her sleep with them?" he asked.

"Gross, dude. She's like our little sister," Misha said, a look of reproach on his face..

"It's also very obvious that she looks at Boss very differently than she looks at the rest of us. She loves us, but she belongs with him," Ivan said.

I couldn't help but laugh. "I trust them. And I trust her even more. Since she and Ivan were taken, she hasn't been able to sleep without someone next to her. It brings her nightmares back if she's alone. Her body reacts sometimes violently. We noticed it early on that I could stop it, but they're able to keep it from starting if she's next to them. And Andrei has the warmest body temperature out of all of them. She's incredibly sensitive to cold."

"That girl has lived through just as much trauma as I have, Vitaliy. Some wounds stay fresh for a very long time," Ivan said.

"She's also exhausted anytime something new happens to her. She's had a few new things happen recently. We're all surprised she lasted this long without sleeping in," Stephen said.

"What new things?" Vitaliy asked.

Misha chuckled. "She gave me and Andrei an extra "f**k you" boost to drive the point home with your two guys. That's never happened before. I also think she's incredibly adorable when she's feeling protective of us, for the record. She was ready to kill those two,"

"How?"

"You felt her anger when we were in Panama. That level was barely registering on her meter. She can deal with in sane levels of anger and outwardly. she looks completely calm. She learned she can push her anger to them that day at the gym. She's been doing it with me for months now, with other emotions too, but it's much easier. She had to get it to a raging inferno to be able to push it to them," I said.

"When we were at the hotel, we figured out we could give it back to her. She panicked when that woman looked at her and she saw her for what she really is. She struggles with her fear, It's the only emotion she can't control. Like her anger, all her emotions are that strong, so when she feels fear. it's to the same in sane, inhuman levels, but she can't control it. Instead of having to deal with that, she was trying to keep her anger levels high enough it would override everything else. Andrei figured out what she was doing and learned he can push his anger back to her. When he did, it fed into mine as well." Ivan said. "The few times I've felt her anger at high levels, I've never been that angry without someone dying. But she walks around like it's a normal Tuesday."

"You can't push yours to her, Vanya?"

"No, I can. It seems to work slightly differently with me and Boss. It's more connected, like hers is a part of us and ours is a part of her, just in different ways." Ivan said.

"How?"

"She explained it the first time it happened. She said she can feel the difference between us. She called me her sword and Ivan her shield. She said my anger was beside her, moving through her, waiting for direction. Ivan's is directed outward from her, away from her, more like a barrier. Like a shield," I said.

"That's why you called him that," Vitaliy said, making the connection.

"She can feel the difference between me and Andrei as well," Misha said. "She said Andrei's is calm and controlled, but deadly. She said mine amps up the f**kery, which I'm totally here for." He grinned mischievously at Vitaliy.

Vitaliy thought for a few moments. "I keep thinking I can't be more impressed by her and she just keeps proving me wrong."

I laughed. "I say that almost daily, Vitaliy."

1 checked on Andrei and Sephie before leaving to go downstairs to the office. They were both sound asleep on the couch. I caught myself wondering if she waited until today so Andrei could sleep too. He'd been busy the last few days. It wouldn't surprise me if she knew he was also exhausted.

Ivan and Viktor walked into my office a few hours later. "Mr. Turner does have a tail that isn't one of ours. Just one guy. We had our guys watch him. to see who he reports to," Viktor said.

"I'm guessing it's the police chief that saw Mr. Turner walk into the building. Our guys said this guy was terrible at his job. Our guys have been on Mr Turner for months and he still hasn't caught on, but this guy was on him for a couple days and was made. The police always think they're on top of their game," Ivan said, shaking his head.

"I need to have a conversation with Henry," I said. "That information we got from the journalist about Ricardo ties him up into a very neat package. I'd like to not f**k that up. Have you heard anything more from the journalist about the mayor?" I asked Viktor.

He shook his head no. "He seemed to think it would be quick work, but I think he overestimated his sleuthing skills. We've found a few things, but they're circumstantial at best."

I nodded. "Keep looking. Maybe ask for an update from him. Might help him along. Chen seemed to really enjoy lying to that guy, so he'll be ready to meet him again when we need him," I said. "Set up a meeting with Henry, in the evening, I want Sephie there when I talk to him."

They both nodded and walked out of the office. I leaned back in my chair, exhaling. The hardest part of all of this was the waiting. Waiting to collect information, waiting for the next piece of the puzzle to reveal itself, waiting for the next betrayal. I was getting impatient. That didn't bode well for everyone against me right now.

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Sephie

I could hear Andrei snoring when I finally woke up. He was louder than Adrik, so I knew who I was sleeping on before I even opened my eyes. I would've been able to tell even if he wasn't snoring. I wasn't warm enough. It was almost warm enough, but not Adrik's perfect warmth.

I opened my eyes, looking outside to try to get a feel for how late in the day it was. It was definitely afternoon, judging by the dim winter sunlight coming through the windows. I picked my head up to look at Andrei. He was pretty adorable when he slept. He was handsome anyway, but he had a boyish innocence to his face when he slept. I found myself watching him sleep for a few moments, enjoying his peacefulness.

He probably needed this extra sleep as much as I did. I hadn't thought about it before now, but he had a new level unlocked between the match with Vitaliy's men and what happened at the hotel. He was probably exhausted. I needed to check on Misha and Ivan to see how those two were doing after the last couple of days' festivities.

I tried to get up as quietly as I could, but his giant arms were still wrapped around me. I knew he was trying to ensure maximum warmth as I slept. Poor guy must be having a heat stroke with me on top of him plus a blanket. He felt me trying to quietly move his arms and he woke up.

"I'm so glad you finally did this, spider monkey. I was exhausted too. You're my favorite," he said, letting go of me to rub his face in his hands.

I laughed. "i was just thinking about that. You got a new level unlocked. It always makes me exhausted when it happens. Are Misha and Ivan just as exhausted as you?"

"I think they're okay. Boss said he's never seen it affect Ivan this morning when he moved you out here."

I thought for a minute. He was right. It had never affected Ivan the same way it did everyone else. "Huh. I never noticed, but you're right. I knew he was a superhuman!" I said, laughing as I got off the couch and Andrei. I stood up to stretch, my joints popping like normal.

Andrei stood up next to me, looking at his phone that had been on the coffee table. He opened it and started typing. "I know if I'm this hungry, you are too. I'll have someone pick up Vinny's for us."

"Bubba, how much longer are you going to make me wait to marry me? I mean, seriously. Stop toying with me already," I said. He grinned at me. He'd finally gotten over his nervousness with me teasing him about marrying me.

He pulled me to him, once again wrapping his arms around me, holding me to his chest. "I love you, spider monkey. But not like that," he said laughing.

I stepped back from him, feigning outrage. I clutched my chest. "It hurts, Bubba. It hurts right here," I said, pretending my heart was breaking. When I looked up at him, he looked surprised.

"Green really does mean sarcasm," he said, smiling at me. I smiled at him, but the sadness from the night before came back. He picked up on it immediately. It seemed like Andrei was very quickly becoming very sensitive to my subtle mood changes, just like Ivan. He was almost as good as Adrik, especially considering it hadn't been happening very long for him. "Don't be sad, spider monkey. It changes nothing. It was just shocking last night when we saw the white eyes. Boss was right. They're scarier than your demon eyes. We just didn't know what to him, his strong arms holding me tightly. "Nobody is going to be uncomfortable around you because of it."

he said, pulling me back to

I sighed, nodding my head, but didn't say anything. He was quiet for a few moments, then added, "all of this is strange for all of us, but we've had you to help us through it. You've had to deal with everything on your own for so long that it's going to feel scary to share with us, but you're the reason I can do what I can do now. I saw you doing it so easily and it gave me courage to try."

I remembered what the acupuncturist had told me about Andrei. I laughed quietly. I looked up at him. "Nobody thought you were going to figure it out this lifetime. You're the youngest out of all of us," I said.

He looked confused. "I'm older than Misha, spider monkey."

I smiled at him. "Your body is older than Misha, but his soul is older than yours. Your soul is the youngest." I thought for a minute, then added, "which really just goes to show how smart and capable you are. You surprised everyone."

"How do you know this?"

I looked up at him, trying to gauge whether he could handle the truth. I decided he could. "You know my dad is a bit of a guardian angel, righ for Adrik's mother. They're around, checking in on us." He nodded his head. "There are also guardian angels that live among us."

"The acupuncturist," he said, like he'd just answered the riddle.

"Did you fish that out of my head or you figured it out before?" I asked.

"I saw there's something different about her. She has a glow that most people don't have," he said.

"She's the only one you've seen that glow on?" I was curious if he'd picked up on Ivan.

He shook his head no. "Ivan has it now too. I never noticed it before he got hurt that day they tried to take you the first time. You and Boss do to but I don't see it all the time on you three. I've seen it every time on the acupuncturist."

"How long have you been able to see this?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Since I was a kid. I've never told anyone because I didn't want them to think I was crazy. My mom probably would've made me wear glasses because she thought there was something wrong with my eyes. I don't always notice it. Like I don't walk around looking at glowing people all day long. The acupuncturist is the only one I've seen that has it every single time."

"Does everyone look the same?"

"No. Different colors. The acupuncturist is gold. Ivan's changes. So does yours and so does Boss's."

"I'm so impressed, Bubba. You had levels I didn't even know about," I said, grinning at him.

After our sandwiches changed our lives for the better and allowed us a brief stay in gastro-intestinal heaven, we made our way to Adrik's office. I was trying to find out what his schedule was like and what Vitaliy was doing today.

No sooner had I walked into the doorway and he looked up like he was expecting me to walk through the door. His wide smile stretched across his face. "You look lighter. You needed that," he said as he pushed his chair back from his desk, opening his arms for me.

"Andrei did too, apparently. That kid has levels I didn't even know about yet, but he feels much better too."

He raised his eyebrow at me, but we were interrupted by Viktor coming into the office with his next meeting. "I'll tell you later," I said, kissing him quickly before leaving the office with Viktor.

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Sephie

I hooked my arm through Viktor's as I followed him to his desk while Adrik had his meeting. "What's his schedule like today, Papa Bear?" I asked.

"Three more meetings after this one, then he's done. Unless I hear back from Henry's office saying he can meet tonight," he answered me in Russian, since there were plenty of ears around the office.

"What about Vitaliy? What's he doing today?"

"He begrudgingly left this morning and said he won't be back until tonight. I don't think he's going to stay much longer. He's annoyed at having to see so many people," he said, trying not to laugh.

"I find it both ironic and hilarious that he's as popular as he is when he returns to the city," I said. I thought for a few moments, then asked, "when will you know if he has an extra meeting tonight? I'm trying to make a plan for feeding you all since I've been slacking on my duties lately."

He chuckled. "You've been exhausted, sestrichka. You haven't been slacking. I've already ordered dinner for tonight anyway, so you don't need to worry." I squinted my eyes at him, but didn't argue. I decided I would spend the afternoon making him a treat instead.

I looked around to see who else was in the office. Stephen was the only one, other than Viktor. I couldn't steal Viktor since he was on master of schedule duties. "Yoden, are you busy this afternoon?"

He looked up from his computer. "Nope. I'm just staring at the screen pretending to be busy right now. It was starting to get boring, so I should thank you. What do you need?" he asked as he closed his laptop.

I reached down and grabbed his arm, pulling him up. "You're coming with me," I said.

"Where are we going? Do you have a plan? Do we need supplies? How long will we be gone? Am I properly dressed? Do I need a coat? Never mind, 1 don't get cold. It's physically impossible," he said. He let a sly smile slip out when I looked up at him. Very uncharacteristic of him, but I loved him a little more for it. He quietly slid his arm around my shoulders as we walked to the elevator, creating a visual barrier between me and curious eyes.

Once we were on the elevator alone, I said, "have I mentioned how f**king funny the Vlad jokes in front of Vitaliy are? Like I love you even more each time it happens. The look on his and Alyosha's faces is just perfection. They're so lost. It's so great." We were both laughing when the elevator doors opened.

It took Stephen such a long time to warm up to me, but now that he had, I adored him. He was so smart and so fre aking funny. He was so quietly hilarious that he kept us all entertained. And he could say anything with a straight face, so those who didn't know him thought he was completely serious while saying some of the du mbest shi t you've ever heard in your life. It was a true gift.

Because he ended up as backup for Viktor in his master of schedule duties, it meant I didn't get to spend as much time with Viktor and Stephen as 1 did the other three. I was starting to suspect that wasn't helping those two realize how they were special, so I'd decided to try and change that as much as I could. It was easier to get time with Stephen on my own. I was going to need Adrik's help to get time with Viktor.

We walked into the kitchen and I started to pull a few things out of the cabinets. Stephen said, "you know Viktor already ordered dinner for tonight, right? You don't have to cook, Seph. You should still rest today."

I smiled at him. "I know, Yoden. I'm making him cookies. You're helping"

He groaned. "My stomach is having a love affair with you. I hope you know that. It's a little weird. It's very unorthodox, but he's very much in love with you. It's to the point that he almost revolts if I eat food made by anyone else. He's not happy about it and he's very loud about that fact."

I laughed at him talking about his stomach like it was a whole other person inside him. "My stomach feels the same about Vinny. So much so that t think Adrik got a little jealous in the beginning."

It was his turn to laugh. "Is he capable of getting jealous? I've never once seen him jealous with you."

"Not when it comes to you guys, ro. Not usually. Although he did struggle with feeling jealous this last time I got hurt. I spent so much time with all of you guys since I did nothing but sleep and apparently I'm incapable of sleeping on my own anymore that he started to feel jealous. It's why you guys only just found out about my eyes. That's been happening for quite a while now. He wanted to keep it just between us for a while," I said. "But he's very possessive in front of other people that aren't you five."

"Huh. I never noticed."

"Because you're too busy analyzing what's been said or what you have noticed. Your brain is very busy. You should cut it some slack for not noticing insignificant things," I said.

"Guilty. It's a gift and a curse," he said. He followed me to the pantry so I could hand him everything I needed for this project.

"I think it's more of a gift than a curse. You just struggle with believing in yourself so you're overanalyzing. Your first instinct is always right. Stop second-guessing yourself. Whoever told you that you were du mb when you were younger was completely wrong."

"You're not supposed to be fishing in my head, remember?" he said, as I piled ingredients in his arms.

"I wasn't. It's so obvious that I didn't need to fish. Much like Ivan doesn't want people to know how wise he is because he values his peace too much, you don't want people to know how wise you are either. But it's because you're insecure with your wisdom. For the record, I find it endearing, but also hilarious. You're seriously one of the smartest people I know. Especially when it comes to how best to mindf**k someone. I'm guessing you felt very misunderstood as a kid?" I asked.

He squinted his eyes at me, like he was unsure he wanted to answer. He sighed, but agreed. "I was. I was very quiet as a kid. My sisters are loud as f**k. So are my parents. I stuck out. While they are loud and obnoxious to distract from what they don't want people to see, I took the opposite approach. I was always quiet, never talked much. My middle sister used to tease me relentlessly for it. She would tell her friends that I was re tarded and they would all pick on me. My youngest sister always went along with everything the middle one did, so when she got old enough, she would tease me as well. My oldest sister would join in sometimes, but not always. She never stopped it though."

"Do you want me to kick your sister's a ss? Because I'll do it," I asked.

He chuckled. "No, I think she's already getting her own Karma. I don't talk to iny sisters often, but my mother keeps me updated on them. My middle sister is on her fourth husband. She struggles to keep a job for very long. It's because she's a miserable human being, but of course she blames everyone else."

"What about your youngest sister?"

"She's not much better, although she hasn't gotten married yet. That's mostly because she has a very loud reputation for being very easy. She's slept her way through the entire town we grew up in. She moved to a larger city, trying to increase her chances of finding a husband. I think she only increased the number of STD's she has."

I couldn't keep from laughing. "I'm sorry. That's not funny. I shouldn't laugh at that."

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Sephie

“I don’t know about that, but I do know that your sisters were very wrong about you,” I said, putting Stephen to work washing a few dishes I’d dirtied.

“On some level, I know that too. There’s…” he started to say, but he didn’t finish. He was quiet for long enough that I knew he wasn’t going to finish.

“I know there’s more, Stephen. You don’t ever have to tell me. I know you’re struggling, but I won’t pry and I won’t fish. You know the best way to conquer your demons, Voden?” He shook his head no. He was still facing away from me, his shoulders slightly slumped. I knew this was difficult for him. “It’s to stop fighting them and make friends with them. They have no power over you that way. The more you try to ignore the monster you’re trying to keep locked away, the bigger and stronger it grows. You have to make friends with it before it consumes you.”

I went back to what I was doing, not wanting to force him to talk anymore than he wanted to. I heard him turn the water in the sink off, then he dried his hands, tossing the towel back on the counter. I felt his hand on my arm as he gently turned me around, then he pulled me against him so tightly, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to breathe. I heard him sniffle a few times. I kept my arms around him just as tightly and would do so for as long as he needed.

“I’ll be right here the whole time, Stephen. You don’t have to face it alone.”

I thought there was no way he could hold me any tighter, but I was wrong. I was so wrong. I knew he was struggling, but I didn’t realize it was this much. I heard him inhale sharply, like he was choking back sobs and my heart just hurt for him.

“I love you, Yoden. And as much as whatever you went through su cked and still su cks, it made you into my absolute favorite vampire of all time. Without you, no one would know what enabling is,” I said, trying to sound serious, but unable to hide my smile.

He laughed and his grip on me loosened. He wiped his eyes before he let me go completely. “I didn’t realize how much I needed that, Seph. I still don’t understand how you do it, but please never stop.”

“Can’t stop, won’t stop,” I said, grinning at him, which made him laugh again. Now come here, I could use extra hands for this part.”

Stephen’s phone beeped while we were waiting for the cookies to come out of the oven. “Henry will be here tonight. Viktor said Boss wants you at the meeting, so whatever we’re doing needs to be finished by 6.”

“He’s very bossy today,” I said, crossing my arms across my chest.

Stephen pretended that he was typing a reply to Viktor. “Sephie says you’re not the boss of her and you can su ck it. Send.”

I laughed. “Even with your lightning fast vampire thumbs, I could see you weren’t even touching the screen. He’s always so sweet about ordering dinner when I need a break, but I seriously think it makes him grumpy when I don’t cook.”

“Um, I thought that one was obvious, Seph. Everyone knows he ha tes it when you don’t cook. He’s just so nice that he’ll never admit it.”

The timer for the oven went off. “He’ll be happy when he sees whatever we’re doing completed by 6, then,” I said, pulling the cookies out of the oven. “The question is, though, should we take one to him before the meeting or make him wait until we’re done for the day to come back up here and find

them?”

“Option 3, I think,” he said.

“What’s option 3?”

“I think you should put them in his apartment. We never lock our doors. We don’t need to. But I think he’s gonna need a minute and it’ll be better if we’re not watching him.”

“Yoden, you’re so incredibly smart. That’s perfect, I would’ve tortured the poor man,” I said. I glanced at the clock on the oven. “Okay, so now we have to hurry slightly to get whatever we’re doing done and down to his apartment and back to the office by 6. Oh my God, the pressure!” I said, dramatically.

Stephen laughed, shaking his head at me. He joined in the dramatics though, taking an extra baking sheet and fanning the cookies so they’d cool faster, which made me laugh.

“You’re my favorite. Don’t tell the others,” I said.

Stephen and I finished up Viktor’s favorite cookies, then snuck downstairs to deliver them to his apartment and made it to the office with five minutes to spare. Everyone else was already in the office, waiting on us, but also still waiting on Henry to arrive. Just as we walked in, Viktor’s phone beeped, signaling that Henry was in the lobby. He walked out right after we walked in.

“What have you two been up to?” Adrik asked. I could tell he was amused that I’d disappeared with Stephen and not one of the others.

“Strategic planning. Vlad’s army is going to be magnificent,” I said.

Stephen surprised us all by laughing loudly. I could get him to laugh when it was just the two of us, but he rarely laughed loudly in front of the group. It made me happy to see. “Seph has a mind for logistics. He was only defending Wallachia before, but now he can finally see the complete destruction. of the Ottoman Empire. I can’t wait to tell him. Those Turks totally have it coming.”

Everyone laughed at his answer. Several of the guys looked surprised at how relaxed Stephen looked. They all caught my eye at one point, giving me small, knowing smiles.

“You shouldn’t fight sleeping in for so long next time, princess. You look much better tonight. Andrei does too. He’s prettier,” Ivan said.

“He is a pretty, pretty princess, Squish. You’re absolutely correct. I think we both needed it,” I said. I heard the doors to the elevator ding, so I got up from Adrik’s lap after kissing him quickly. He still had a very amused expression on his face.

Viktor walked in with Henry and the mood turned more serious in an instant. Everyone went into boss mode.

Adrik extended his hand to Henry as he walked to his desk. They shook hands before Henry sat down in front of Adrik’s desk. He glanced back to me, smiling. “Sephie, you’re looking much better than the last time I saw you.”

“I mean, that depends. Sometimes I want to be colorful,” I said, referring to the heavy bruising I’d had the last time. “But life is much better with two arms again.”

He chuckled, shaking his head. He looked at Adrik. “What do you have for me this time?”

“Your police chiefs. How well do you know them?” Adrik asked. He was now very serious. There was no trace of the amusement that was evident not two minutes ago.

“Well, before you asked me that question, I would have said very well. Now that you’ve asked me that question, I’m wondering if that’s the correct answer,” Henry said, a look of worry on his face.

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Sephie

“We have it on very good authority that two of your police chiefs are loyal to the mayor,” Adrik said. We both saw Henry’s face fall.

“Do you know which ones?” he asked.

Adrik nodded his head. Ivan got up and put two files down on Adrik’s desk in front of Henry. “They both met with the mayor. After you met with all of them to discuss taking down the mayor. We only have confirmation on these two, but I wouldn’t trust any of them at this point,” Adrik said. Henry looked stunned. “How much have you told them about the mayor? Or about Ricardo?”

“Nothing about Ricardo. I’m sitting on that one. I’ve been after that guy so long that I don’t want to risk messing it up. But they have everything I have on the mayor so far,” Henry said.

Adrik looked to Viktor, saying in Russian, “we definitely need to hurry that journalist up.”

Viktor responded, still in Russian, saying, “I contacted him earlier. I’ll check when this is over to see if he responded.”

Adrik nodded, then looked back to Henry. “We’re working to gather more information on the mayor, but it takes time. Until we get more on him, be very careful what you tell the other police chiefs.”

“Agreed. Let me know when you get something definitive on the mayor. Until then, I don’t think we should do this again,” Henry said. He suddenly looked worried, like he was nervous. I glanced to Andrei, who caught it as well. We both focused back on Henry, trying to figure out the reason for his

nervousness.

“We have other places we can meet the next time, if you’re nervous about coming here,” Adrik said. He had also picked up on his nervousness.

They conversed for a short time more, while I quietly studied Henry. The first time we’d met with him, I got the feeling that he was a good man, trying to do the right thing. This time, something had changed about him and I wasn’t sure what it was, but I wasn’t sure I liked it.

Henry stood up to leave, once again shaking Adrik’s hand. When he did, I saw Adrik stiffen ever so slightly. That’s new. I glanced to Andrei, who clearly had seen something as well. Stephen’s phone beeped as Viktor was walking Henry back to the elevator. “Dinner’s here. Be right back,” he said, jogging out of the office to catch the elevator.

Once we heard the doors close, I walked to Adrik. “What happened when you shook his hand before he left?”

“Did you feel it?” he asked.

I shook my head no. “I didn’t feel anything, but I saw you tense. It’s different. You don’t do that.”

Ivan chuckled. “Vitaliy is also a Game Master, it seems,” he said.

I remembered. Adrik was like Vitaliy. “That escalated quickly,” I said, raising my eyebrow at him.

“Did you feel it when he first came into the office?” Ivan asked.

Andrel spoke up, “something changed while he was in here. He made some decision while he was here and something changed. I couldn’t figure out what it was, though.”

“It’s something to do with power. He wants it. He doesn’t like it that Adrik has it. But we should wait for Stephen. Somehow I think he’s going to have Insight into this,” I said.

It didn’t take Jung and Viktor and Stephen returned. We were all waiting for them at the elevator, so we could go to the penthouse, where we knew wo could speak freely. When the doors opened and we were all standing there, Viktor and Stephen both looked surprised.

you guys that hungry?” Stephen asked.

I laughed. “No, we just need to be in the penthouse to finish the discussion we started. And we needed your insight and Viktor’s sleuthing skills. We were saving time.”

“I just really feel like Vlad is going to make you his Director of Operations. Logistics, efficiency, systems, you’ve got it all handled. His army is going to run like a well-oiled machine because of you,” Stephen said.

“Da mmit, I was really hoping for Supreme Leader, but Director of Operations does have a nice ring to it. I’m not opposed to working my way up through his organization.”

“Okay, somebody catch us up,” Stephen said as we started dinner.

“Boss felt something different when he shook Henry’s hand at the end. He didn’t feel it when he walked in. Andrei said something changed while Henry was in the office, like he made a decision while he was in there and things are different now,” Ivan said.

“I couldn’t get as many details as I wanted from him, but I think we can fill in more in a bit with Misha. What I did get, however, was that it was related to power. Henry wants it. He doesn’t like that Adrik already has it.” I looked to Adrik. “Do you remember when we first met with him – how uncomfortable he got when you first told him you were getting rid of the other bosses?”

He nodded his head. “You made the comment he thought that was too much power for one man. He was worried I was going to become a tyrant.”

I started to speak, but Ivan said, “he wants to be the tyrant.”

“He got it in his head last time that he could replace the mayor and he would run the city. When Boss knew more than him this time, it pi ssed him off. I bet he made a decision to come after Boss now. I don’t think he’s st upid enough to try it right away, but if we keep the plan of trying to get him into the mayor’s seat, he’ll do it then,” Stephen said.

Adrik looked to Misha. “Do you think you can find out? We’ve never tried to find a specific answer before.”

“I’d be happy to try. Sephie and Andrei help make things clearer. It’s different almost every time it happens,” Misha said.

I looked at Andrei. “I could clearly see your thoughts the last time we did it. Did it happen for you too?”

“You could? What was I thinking about?” Andrei asked.

I started laughing and almost couldn’t stop myself. It took me a few minutes to answer. I couldn’t believe I’d forgotten about this. “We were looking. for Martin, so you were thinking about him. And a cheeseburger. Not necessarily in that order, either,” I said, still trying to contain my laughter.

“That seems completely accurate,” Andrei said.

“He wasn’t holding back. He was just focusing on cheeseburgers instead, Misha said, laughing. “That’s why it wasn’t as clear with just him.”

“To be fair, I spend a lot of time thinking about cheeseburgers, too,” Viktor said, his deep belly laugh filling the penthouse.

“I mean, who doesn’t love a good cheeseburger?” Andrel said. His cheeks were flushed, but he was laughing just as much as everyone else.

“New rule: we can only look for people after Andrei’s belly is full. For best results,” Adrik said, which caused another round of laughter from everyone.

Vitaliy and Aleksel walked into the penthouse as we were still laughing about Andrei’s random thoughts. Vitally was surprised to see us all laughing so heartily. “You guys must’ve gotten very good news today,” he said, a small smile on his face as he watched us all try to gain control of ourselves.

“The opposite, really. But one of Sephie’s many gifts is giving us a reason to laugh for a few minutes. It’s always perfect timing and it’s always much needed, Adrik said, his wide smile stretching across his face as he looked at me. I felt the pull in my chest that meant he was thinking about how much he loved me.I answered by sending my warmth back to him, loving the wink he gave me when he felt it

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Adrik

“Have you ever had someone feel different to you from the beginning of a conversation to the end?” 1 asked Vitaliy.

He nodded. “It happens more than you’d think. People make decisions in haste and their entire existence changes in the course of a few minutes. Why? Did it happen to you already?” I nodded. He cursed under his breath. “It took me years to get that detailed. It took you 24 hours of finding out

you were like me.”

I nodded toward Sephie. “I have a feeling she has something to do with it. Something changed in the course of a meeting tonight. Because I can feel what she feels, I felt the shift when she picked up on it. It made me pay closer attention. I didn’t feel anything at the beginning of the meeting, but I definitely did at the end.”

“Did you feel what he feels, sladkaya?” Vitaliy asked Sephie.

“No, I didn’t feel anything, but I noticed he tensed slightly when he shook his hand. He doesn’t do that. Ever,” she said. “Both Andrei and I picked up on the change in him during the meeting, but neither one of us could get a definite answer on what caused it. We’re going to see if Misha can find the answer after dinner. Andrei works best on a full stomach,” she said, winking at him. He grinned at her as he took another bite of food,

“You can do that?” Vitaliy asked Misha.

Misha just shrugged his shoulders. “We’ve never gone looking for the answer to that specific of a question before. We’ve only looked for people and then pieced together the information we can see when we find them, but when I use both Sephie and Andrei, I can hear conversations. I doubt this guy will be speaking Spanish, so we should be able to understand his conversations.”

“Who is this guy?**

“Henry, the police commissioner. We found out from Sephie’s old neighbor that the mayor wants Henry out, but Henry is also working on a plan with the police chiefs to get the mayor out. Only, two police chiefs met with the mayor three days after they met with Henry. One is from Armando’s area, the other is from Niko’s area. We’ve been working on solid proof that the mayor is in either Sal or Ricardo’s pocket,” Ivan said.

“But we also think Henry decided that he can run the city. Sephie picked up on something the first time we met with him. He was very uncomfortable when Boss told him he was getting rid of all the bosses. She said she thought it was because he was worried Boss would become a tyrant. We think he changed his mind tonight and now he wants to be the tyrant,” Stephen said.

“We’re hoping Misha can confirm that,” I said.

Vitaliy looked stunned for a moment, then looked at Sephie. “How did you know this before?”

“I saw the subtle change in his demeanor when Adrik told him he was getting rid of the bosses. I don’t go fishing through people’s heads unless I have a reason. When I saw his demeanor change, I took a peek. He was going through possibilities of how to rein in Adrik once he was in power. It was almost comical what he was thinking about. I imagine it’s what the city would look like if Sal or Lorenzo had taken over, but not Adrik,” she said.

“Was he thinking specifically about Sal or Lorenzo? Can you remember, Seph?” Stephen asked.

She thought for a few minutes, but ultimately shook her head no. “That was during my Sleeping Beauty era. I don’t remember as much as I should,” she said. “Why? What are you thinking?”

“If that’s where his mind went when thinking about Boss having power, then that’s a good indication that he knows Sal or Lorenzo better than he knows Boss. Everyone knows the peace Boss brought to the city. The entire population is richer because of him. No offense, Vitaliy, but the city has prospered since he took over. It doesn’t make sense that Henry would be worried about Adrik being in power. He doesn’t want the city to continue to prosper? He ha tes making more money than he’s ever made before? That doesn’t make sense. Unless he knows Sal or Lorenzo or even one of the other bosces better than Boss and knows the kind of tyrant they actually would be,” Stephen said.

“What are your plans for this Henry?” Vitaliy asked.

“We were going to help him defeat the mayor in the next election, but that might be off the table depending on what Misha can find. He has

everything we have on Ricardo, but he can also use that to come after Boss instead, should he choose to. We have the same guy that gave us all the information on Ricardo looking for something on the mayor, we just haven’t heard back from him yet,” Ivan said.

As he said that, Viktor pulled his phone out of his pocket. He looked at it for a few seconds, obviously reading something, then said, “we did hear back from him. He’s got something, but he said it’s not enough. He said he’s looking for more and will get back to me as soon as possible.”

It was always hard to read my father, but he clearly looked proud as he listened to us tell him everything we knew. More so on how we knew it. He looked to me, after listening to everyone and said, “your mother was right. You’re going to realize everything I couldn’t and more.” He was thoughtful for a moment, then asked, “this information you have on Ricardo, what is it?”

“It frames him as being the one running the city behind the scenes. It makes him look like he’s Boss. The guy that got us the information is very thorough, just not thorough enough to find Boss. Or you,” Viktor said. “Originally, we handed it over to Henry, thinking the mayor was a stand-up guy since he’s the one that appointed Henry, but Sephie caught on that the mayor was questionable during that meeting too. Henry said he can’t prove it, but he’s been looking into the mayor for a while now. We started helping him, feeding him information that we could find, but now that’s compromised because he shared it with the police chiefs that are loyal to the mayor, apparently.”

“And what of the information on Ricardo? Did he share that too?” Vitaliy asked.

“No. Or at least he said he hasn’t. We can’t be sure,” Ivan said.

Vitaliy thought for a few minutes. He looked at Aleksei, saying “we need to meet with Battista again before he leaves.” Aleksei simply nodded, then walked away as he pulled his phone out of his pocket. Vitaliy looked back at me. “Battista likes politics. He knows the right people in da mn near every city in the world. Sephie impressed him: at the first meeting. He will gladly help you find all the information you never knew you needed on the mayor.”

“I thought you said his English was shi t?” Sephie asked.

Vitaliy grinned at her. “It is shi t, but he still speaks it when he has to. Knowing he doesn’t have to with you was incentive for him to make extra effort. He can be fickle. After your performance at lunch, he’ll bend over backwards to help you. Everything happens the way it’s supposed to, sladkaya. Sometimes you have to trust the process,” he said, winking at her.

“You’re like a really grumpy evil genius,” she said quietly, her eyes slightly wide in appreciation at his scheming.

Vitaliy looked at her, not knowing whether to laugh along with everyone else or be mad at her. In the end, he couldn’t contain his laughter and ended up laughing along with everyone else, as she walked to him, sliding her arm around his shoulders. I watched my father laugh harder than I’d ever seen him laugh and relish in the affection he got from her as a result of doing so.

She was still showing everyone around her the best parts of themselves.

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Adrik

“I think it’s worth taking another look at Henry, no matter what Misha can find tonight,” I said. “Something feels very off with him now. Like we missed something last time, I don’t like surprises.”

“I’ll see what I can start to find in the morning,” Viktor said.

Sephie stood up, extending her hands to both Misha and Andrei. They readily stood up and took her hands, walking a short distance away from the kitchen. She looked back over her shoulder, asking, “who has it that he wants to be the evil overlord of the city?” She waited for a few of us to raise our hands. Then she asked, “who has it that Henry’s the one in Sal’s pocket instead of the mayor?” She put her own hand up, along with me.

“Oh, that’s not fair. I change my bet,” Misha said.

“I could be wrong, my adorable Russian guardian. It’s happened before,” she said, grinning at him.

“Yeah, like once. Seven years ago before you knew us,” he said. He just shook his head and grabbed her hand. “Let’s see what we can find,” he said, getting that faraway look in his eye.

Vitaliy was extremely curious to watch what was happening, even though it didn’t look like much. They all looked like they were in a trance when it happened, but once they saw something, it was obvious. They were watching something in front of them that the rest of us couldn’t see. I could still feel what Sephie was feeling when she was watching the movie, but I couldn’t see what she was seeing.

It took them a few minutes, but we heard Misha say, “got him.” He squeezed both Sephie and Andrei’s hands harder, which always meant he had found what they were looking for, Vitaliy looked to me, his eyebrow raised. I walked closer to him, so I could be quiet, not wanting to interrupt anything.

“Misha sees a movie playing in front of him, basically. When Sephie touches him, she can see it too. We recently learned Andrei can do it as well, since he’s like her. They both give Misha extra clarity. He would only get snapshots before Sephie started helping him,” I said.

“They discovered this when the Colombian was under attack?” he asked. I nodded my head. “That’s a useful skill,” he said, going back to watching them, patiently waiting for the results.

I could feel Sephie’s anger rise the longer they watched, so I knew something was happening. Vitaliy picked up on both me and Ivan focusing on her. “She’s feeling something, isn’t she?” he asked.

“I can feel her anger. It likely means Sal is involved,” I said.

Ivan moved closer, so he could speak quietly as well. “Her anger feels different for different situations. Whenever Sal’s name is brought into the picture, it feels like she’s going to burn the world to get to him. She’s still dealing with being taken by him and Armando. It’s a lot for her to process,”

he said.

Vitaliy scoffed. “She has good reason to be that angry. Sal is evil. It sounds like he’s only gotten more so over the years. His son was no better. She has every reason to ha te that entire family.”

Misha, Sephie, and Andrei watched the movie only they could see for much longer than they usually did. Sephie’s anger levels stayed high the entire time, so I was almost positive Sal’s name had come up in the conversation somehow. We finally saw Misha relax and look down at Sephie. He looked concerned, but slightly amused.

“Gazelle, you feel like you’re going to explode. Like, for real, for real. Spontaneous human combustion is a real thing. You need to be careful,” he said.

“I’m guessing that Sal is involved somehow?” I asked.

She turned to look at me, her anger still clearly visible, but she was also surprised. “How did you know?” she asked, walking to me.

“Your anger feels different when he’s involved, princess,” Ivan said.

When she walked to me, Vitaliy extended his hand to her. “Come, I want to feel,” he said, motioning for her to give him her hand.

I tried to shake my head no discreetly, warning him that was not a good idea. He definitely wasn’t ready to feel her anger when it was this high, but he insisted.

Ivan just laughed. “You better be ready, Vitaliy.”

She reluctantly placed her hand in his. His eyes went wide, his cheeks flushed, and his breathing immediately sped up. He dropped her hand, almost like it had burned him. Her eyes went wide in response, looking apologetic. She was suddenly scared she’d hurt him. She tried to hide herself behind me. Ivan, Andrei, and Misha all felt her panic and quietly moved to surround her.

“It’s okay, princess. You didn’t hurt him. He just wasn’t ready for it,” Ivan said quietly. His voice was soft, like he was trying to coax her out of her panic. She turned to him, burying her face in his chest while I kept an eye on Vitaliy to make sure he really was okay. His giant arms engulfed her, making her look tiny standing in front of him.

“I told you the level you felt before was nothing. This isn’t even the highest it’s been,” I said, smirking at my father.

Vitaliy took a few moments to get his wits about him again. He was stunned, literally and figuratively. Finally, he shook his head, asking, “how does she contain all of that?”

Ivan laughed, his arms still protectively around her. “Told you. It’s enough to cripple all of us and she walks around like it’s completely normal.”

Misha, ever the instigator, said, “you should really pay attention when people try to warn you, Vitaliy.”

We heard Sephie quietly laugh, but she kept her face hidden in Ivan’s chest. I could feel the fear slowly subsiding, but it always took longer than other emotions. She still really struggled with controlling it. We were quiet for a few moments, when Stephen broke the silence.

“Seph has been hiding all of this for a very long time. She’s only showing it to everyone now because she knows we can protect her. She’s become a master at covering up the fact that she’s different for fear of what will happen if someone finds out. That’s how she walks around like it’s a normal Tuesday,” he said. “That’s also why her fear is harder to control, for the record. She’s scared for all of us more than she’s scared for herself.”

I watched Andrei’s eyes glaze over as I knew he was confirming what Stephen had just said. He was quiet for a minute, then he looked at me, nodding once. Stephen had nailed it.

We heard Sephie sigh, then she said, “I told you your first instinct was always right, Yoden. Bubba confirms it.” Her face was still hidden in Ivan’s chest, so she didn’t see Andrei double-checking what Stephen had said. “You should listen to it more. You’ve been right multiple times tonight,” she said, finally turning to look at us once again. She smiled sweetly at Stephen. Whatever they had discussed this afternoon was clearly working.

“You’re getting better at that, princess. You didn’t see him checking,” Ivan said. He kept his arms around her shoulders in a bear hug as she stayed leaning against him, just turned toward us instead of hiding.

She shrugged her shoulders. “I can say the same for you two,” she said, looking up at Ivan and then looking at me. “You were right. Sal is involved.”

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Adrik

“What could you guys see?” I asked Misha.

“Once again, it was different. It was like someone was scrolling through the movie to find the right scene to answer our question. Once we found it, we heard Henry on the phone. We didn’t hear the other side of the conversation, but he addressed Sal by name. He was in the middle of a park, at night, so he spoke freely,” Misha said.

“It’s Henry that’s in Sal’s pocket. The mayor might be also; they didn’t speak about him, but Henry has been getting money from Sal. They were extra sneaky with how he got it, so no one ever caught on. From what I could gather, he’s been paid mostly in cash, so no one can trace it,” Sephie said.

“What’s their plan?” Ivan asked.

Misha laughed. “It’s funny, but it’s not. We gave them the plan. Sal is backing Henry to get the mayor position. Once there, he’s coming for Boss.”

“He never gave specifics, but he said he has enough information to put Boss away for a long time. It’s going to be his first major move as mayor,” Andrei said.

It was my anger that rose very quickly. Sephie felt it, walking quickly to me. She knew immediately that I was struggling against it, livid at yet another betrayal. “Close your eyes, Bubba,” she said, right before her lips crashed to mine. She kissed me with such passion; my anger subsided so quickly, I didn’t even hear the laughter from her warning to Andrei. There was just her lips on mine, her desire for me growing with each second. I felt her knees start to go and pulled her to me tightly, holding her up as she deepened the kiss even more. I felt myself finally under control and she broke the kiss. She looked up at me, her desire still very evident to no one but me, and she smiled sweetly at me. “Better,” she said, turning around to lean back against me as she kept my arms wrapped around her.

When she turned to face everyone else, Vitaliy was understandably surprised at what he’d just witnessed. “It’s his ki ll switch,” she said. I could hear the smile when she spoke. “He has a harder time controlling his anger when it reaches nuclear levels. That makes it go away. Sorry for the impromptu show,” she said.

Vitaliy nodded once, giving me a smirk, then asked, “do you know what Sal is planning on doing while he waits for Henry to be elected? That’s not until next year, correct?”

“They didn’t discuss that part, but I’m sure he’s thinking he can lay low until then,” Andrei said.

I looked at Misha. “How many times can you do this before you get zapped or you zap her?”

“I’ve got a couple more in me tonight, for sure. I think with Andrei, too, it helps keep her from getting zapped. As long as he stops holding back,”” Misha said, adding air quotes for hilarity.

“I think it’s worth checking on Sal to see what we can find out with him. Or Ricardo. Or both, if you have enough energy for that tonight,” I said. “I also think we need to check into the mayor even more than we have.”

“It’s entirely possible that Henry has been framing the mayor this whole time, making it look like he’s the one getting money from Sal, when really it’s been Henry. Or Henry is fabricating what he has on the mayor to deflect attention away from himself. Most people are easily distracted. If we’re busy looking into the mayor, we’re not going to look into Henry. I’m starting to think he thinks he’s smarter than us, which really pi sses me off,” Stephen

said.

“Like normal pi ssed off or you want to destroy his mind so completely that he no longer wishes to exist pi ssed off?” Sephie asked.

Stephen chuckled. “Not to the latter option. Yet.”

“Noted.” She looked back at Misha and Andrel. “Ready to find Sal? Bubba, do you want a snack first?” she asked, unable to hide her smile as she teased him.

“Shu t up and come here,” he said, still standing with Misha. He was smiling at her as he extended his hand to her. Misha did the same. Before they started looking for Sal, she asked, “do you have a specific question you want answered for Sal? That seemed to work last time.”

“See if you can find out if Sal is working with the mayor. Maybe we can eliminate two birds with one stone, Ivan said.

“At your service,” she said, giving him a curtsey before they started trying to find Sal.

Once they were quiet, Vitaliy looked to me and Ivan. “You both can feel all of her anger when she’s like that?”

We both nodded. “I’m guessing it works differently for us than it did for you. She shares her control with us when she shares her anger,” I said. “She’s the one that taught me how to get mine under control. She can ki ll the bloodlust in me instantly with one look.”

Vitaliy’s eyes went wide. Viktor overheard our conversation, moving closer so we could stay quiet. “It’s true. I didn’t believe it when I saw it happen the first time, but she’s done it many times now. When we got to her and Ivan, Boss was about to ki ll Armando, but Sephie’s lung collapsed and she was having trouble breathing. Me, Andrei, and Misha were downstairs in the building. Ivan called us to try and get Boss off Armando so we could get her to the hospital. But she just walked over to him and said she needed him before we could make it upstairs. He stopped instantly and picked her up. He was in a complete rage when we got to that building. Between him and Stephen, the rest of us didn’t have to do anything. She stopped it with one touch and three words, though,” Viktor said.

“It becomes more and more obvious that she was made for you, the more I learn about her,” Vitaliy said, looking at me.

“They were made for each other. He brings out things in her that no one else can, just like she does for him. Their connection is other-worldly,” Stephen said.

We saw Misha move and knew that the movie was over. This time, I didn’t feel Sephie’s anger at all while they were watching the movie. We all looked toward them, expectantly.

“I think we watched the same conversation, just from the other side this time, Misha said. “But at least Sal was speaking English so me and Andrei could understand him as well.”

“Stephen was right. Henry is on the take, not the mayor. He’s framing the mayor so we’d look at him. Sal made a comment about not being able to get to the mayor. He was angry about it. He’s also angry with Henry. It looked like he’s just angry in general, really,” Andrei said, smiling.

“He and Lorenzo were close. He’s not going to take his death lightly,” Vitaliy said.

“I still find it interesting that he’s grieving more for his brother than he is his own son,” Sephie said. “I’ve not heard him mention Anthony’s name one time in any conversation.”

Stephen suddenly inhaled. “What if Anthony wasn’t really his kid? Didn’t Andy say something like he would’ve believed Anthony belonged to Massimo

more than he would Sal?”

“Why would Sal steal Massimo’s kid though? Isn’t that a little extreme, even for Sal?” Misha said.

Stephen was thoughtful for a minute, trying to make the connection. Sephie, in her quiet way, walked to him, taking his hand while he was deep in thought. He glanced down at her. It was obvious he was fighting more than making a connection. She smiled up at him, saying something quietly so only he could hear. He nodded once. She was still for a few seconds, then said, “what if Sal was trying to hurt Massimo the same way Massimo hurt Dario? I don’t know how Massimo was about women, but judging by the rest of them, they probably have plenty of children they may or may not know about. What if Sal found out Anthony was Massimo’s and took him before Massimo found out? Talk about a ‘f**k you.””

“Dario might know. I definitely think the story of Dario and Sal hating each other all these years was really Sal and Massimo hating each other,” Ivan

said.

“We can talk to him again. I don’t mind Armando knowing we have Dario now. He might not even be lucid enough to recognize him at this point,” I

said.

“I’m surprised you’ve let him live this long.” Vitally said.

“I’ve never wanted someone to suffer as much as I want him to suffer. I’m going to drag it out as long as possible. I’ll get him medical care, even. He’s not allowed to d ie until I say he can d ie,” I said.

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Adrik

Once Sephie and I were alone that night, I asked her what had happened with Stephen, both while they had disappeared during the afternoon and what happened when he looked like he was struggling earlier.

She exhaled loudly. “Ugh. So, I want to kill his sisters now. I got him to open up a little bit this afternoon. We were making Viktor’s favorite cookies by the way. He gets very grumpy when I haven’t cooked in a few days and it shows,” she said, laughing quietly.

“Why do you want to kill his sisters? I didn’t even know he had sisters. He never talks about them,” I said.

“For good reason. His sisters were always mean to him growing up. Much more than normal sibling bickering mean. He told me that’s why it took hi so long to warm up to me. He was waiting for me to turn mean too,” she said. She’d taken her contacts out already and I watched her eyes change t the amber brown that meant she was sad. She climbed on top of me, straddling my lap. “There’s more to the story, but I wasn’t going to make him t me. He really struggled even just with that. That’s what happened in the kitchen earlier. When Misha questioned him, it made him insecure. Stepher doesn’t like me in his head, but I asked him if I could look tonight. I told him I knew he’d made the connection already, but he was frozen by his insecurities. I was right. It was easy to find, but he was over-analyzing because he was worried he was wrong.”

She chewed on her bottom lip, her eyes still golden amber. I could feel how upset she was, but it was different. She was upset for him. She looked at me, her fingers tracing lightly over my facial hair. “I told him this afternoon that he should always trust his first instinct. He’s so smart, but he doesn believe how smart he is. He’s so freaking hilarious too, I love him a little more each time he makes a joke about Vlad in front of Vitaliy,” she said, leaning her head on my shoulder in a fit of giggles. I laughed with her. It was quickly becoming one of my favorite things as well. My father was convinced that Vlad was a living person at this point. I certainly wasn’t going to tell him any different.

While we were still laughing, my phone beeped on the nightstand. Sephie sat up so I could check it. It was a message from Viktor.

Tell Sephie thank you and I love her. She knows why.

I showed her the message. “The cookies?” I asked.

She nodded. “He told me his wife used to make these cookies for him when they first got married. He said he couldn’t get enough of them. I almost didn’t try to make them, because they’re not going to be the same. She was the secret ingredient. But he’s been so grumpy since I haven’t cooked the past few days that I decided to give it a try. It gave me a reason to kidnap Stephen, so I think it worked out. I think those two are slower about figuring out how they’re special because I don’t spend as much time with them.”

“You can kidnap whoever you like, solnishko. They all know what to do. One of the other ones will step in to take care of things,” I said, twirling one of her curls around my finger.

“I might start stealing Stephen a little more often. Viktor is going to be more difficult. I need your help with him. He enjoys his job too much. He’s very good at it, don’t get me wrong, but he doesn’t like to leave his regular duties.”

“He would if it meant spending time with you. They would all much rather spend time with you than anything else they have to do.”

“Viktor always grabs one of the other guys when I try to steal him, though. He was also the most unnerved about my eyes changing. I might scare him now,” she said.

I laughed. “You don’t scare him, love. You don’t scare any of them. Viktor loves you just as much as the rest of them.”

She squinted her eyes at me like she didn’t believe me, but she didn’t argue further.

“What about Andrei? You said earlier that he had levels you didn’t even know about? What happened?” I asked.

She husked at me, wide-eyed. “That kid can see auras and he never told anyone.”

I laughed at her response. “Explain.”

“He didn’t call it an aura. He said there’s a glow to certain people. He sees it on the acupuncturist. I didn’t tell you, but she works with my dad. And probably your mom, now that I think about it. She told me. Andrei and I were talking about my reaction to their shock at seeing my eyes when we woke up today. He said I was the reason he can do what he can do now and that’s when I told him he was the youngest and that nobody expected him to figure it out in this lifetime. He asked me how I knew. I didn’t say anything about the acupuncturist and he said it was her. He can see a different “glow” about her than the rest of us.” She moved to get off my lap, stretching her back and lying down next to me. “Of course, I was curious to know if he saw it on anyone else. He said he sees it now on Ivan, since the first kidnapping attempt when he almost died. He didn’t notice it on him before that happened, but that makes sense. He also sees it on you and me. But he doesn’t see it all the time on us, where he does on the acupuncturist. He said he doesn’t walk around looking at glowing people all day, either. It must only come up sometimes for him, but he said he’s seen it since he was a kid.”

I thought for a minute. “What if it’s the opposite of what Ivan can see? Ivan sees the evil, Andrei sees the good. That might be why it’s not around us all the time. We’re both, but the acupuncturist is only good.”

“That would make sense. I want to talk to him about it more. It’s best to ease into those conversations with him right now. He’s still a little overwhelmed with everything. He’s handling it well, but it’s a lot for him,” she said.

“It really cuts into his cheeseburger thoughts,” I said. Sephie’s laughter was music to my ears, effectively making me forget the stress of the day.

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Sephie

The next afternoon, we were all on our way to the hotel where Mr. Turner worked to meet with Battista once again. “You’re sure that woman won’t be with him this time,” I had asked Vitaliy as we were leaving.

He chuckled. “No, she will no longer be an issue, sladkaya.”

“Um, do I want to know what that means?”

“Battista told me he got into an argument with her over her behavior at the last meeting. He told her she embarrassed him and he refused to do business with such an inconsiderate person. She threatened to destroy him, which was what he was wanting to happen. It will be her that is destroyed. He just needed a reason,” Vitaliy said.

“Remind me to stay on his good side,” I said.

Vitaliy laughed loudly. “You never have to worry about that. Battista is a smart man. He knows there’s something about you that’s different. He knows of my ability. He suspects it in Adrik. He’s almost certain you have something that can prove to be very beneficial to him, should he ever need it. He will keep you close, sladkaya.”

“I mean, no pressure.”

We walked to the front door of the hotel, again like modern-day royalty with so many heavily armed guards. Mr. Turner was happy to see us as always, “Miss Sephie, I’m so happy I get to see you again so soon,” he said as I stepped away from everyone to give him a hug.

“How are things today, Mr. Turner? Good? Uneventful?”

“It’s a fine day, Miss Sephie. A fine day. Made better since I get to see you,” he said. His grandfatherly smile stretched across his face.

“You’re my favorite, Mr. Turner,” I said, as he opened the door for us to walk inside. This time, Vitaliy wasn’t surprised at me talking to Mr. Turner, but he did have a small smile across his face as we walked inside. I stepped closer to him and said quietly, “you’re being a cheeseball, old man. Tighten up before Battista sees you.”

I was not prepared for the laughter that came out of that man as we were walking to the restaurant. The guys were all shocked, but most of all, Adrik was completely taken aback at his father losing his composure in public. I just shrugged my shoulders and tucked myself into Adrik’s side as we continued on our way. The guys silently closed in around us to keep me as out of sight as possible.

Battista was waiting on us in an empty restaurant, but this time, only the male associate that was with him before was present. No woman to be found. I found myself completely relieved that she would not be there, more for Ivan’s sake than anything else.

Battista greeted Vitaliy and Adrik warmly. This time, Adrik didn’t let go of me when he went to greet him. Battista’s attention quickly shifted to me. He took my hand, turning it over to kiss the back of it, just like he’d done before. “Sephie, I still cannot thank you enough. You have no idea what a gift you’ve given me,” he said to me in Italian.

“Well, if I knew you took this much pleasure in destroying deserving people, I wouldn’t have waited so long to expose her. Next time, give me warning that’s what you want. I’ll make it quick. You won’t have to wait,” I responded. Both Vitaliy and Battista laughed, exchanging a quick glance between

each other.

Battista motioned toward the tables. “Come, let us discuss business,” he said. As we walked to the table, Adrik searched my eyes, wanting a translation. He laughed quietly when he found his answer. He pulled the chair out for me, leaning down to kiss my cheek after I sat down.

After everyone was seated, Battista spoke English. He spoke it quite well. I wasn’t sure whether I should be irritated with Vically or impressed. “So. You’re looking for information on the mayor as well as the police commissioner?” he asked Adrik.

Adrik nodded his head. “We think the commissioner is framing the mayor so he can get rid of him and take his spot. We thought the mayor was in Sal’s pocket, but now it looks like the commissioner is the one in his pocket. He has quite a bit of information on Ricardo, too. Enough to put him away for a very long time. He could use that information against me, however. That’s what we think he’s planning on doing. We’re trying to figure out if the mayor is an ally.”

“If the mayor is an ally, he will help get rid of Ricardo, then?” Battista asked.

“Possibly, yes. The information is there, but he’s going to need help since his police commissioner is di rty. It’s likely most of the police chiefs are too. We don’t even know about the DA yet. But aside from all that, the information is good against Ricardo. It makes it look like he’s the one that’s been. running the city behind the scenes. Which ironically is what he’s been trying to do for years, apparently,” Adrik said.

“And what if the mayor is di rty, along with everyone else?” Battista asked.

Then Ricardo di es, along with Sal,” I said flatly..

Battista looked at me for a moment, his hand on his chin. He looked at Vitaliy and said in Italian, “I really like her.” He looked back at Adrik, saying, “I will get you the information you need on the mayor. I can look into the rest of them as well. I’ve heard very little about Sal and Ricardo since they’ve been in Italy. It’s almost like they’re hiding. Niko and Vito are still with them. I do know that for sure.” He sighed. “There are very influential people around the world that would be willing to help you get rid of Ricardo De Luca. He’s greatly disliked by very powerful people. They’ll have no problems also getting rid of anyone that’s aligned with him if they know he’s going down for sure.”

“I have no problems erasing Sal from history. I have a feeling that Ricardo has been behind much of what Sal has done recently, which means I have. no problems with also erasing him from history,” Adrik said, his anger clearly visible.

Battista raised an eyebrow, curious as to what Adrik was referring to. He looked between Adrik and Vitaliy. “Sal kidnapped her and was going to sell her,” Vitaliy said. It surprised me that he said it in Italian. Battista looked to me, asking in Italian if that was true. I nodded my head. Battista was silent for a moment. He looked to Adrik. “Whatever you need to make this happen, I will help you. Ricardo must be stopped.”

I caught Vitaliy smirking at me. He just winked at me when he saw me look at him.

In the parking garage underneath Adrik’s building, Vitaliy placed my arm through his as we walked to the elevator. “Battista’s help comes with a price. He’ll eventually confirm his suspicions that there is something special about you. He’s going to ask for your help at some point in the future.”

“Please tell him that I can’t move anything with my mind so moving Disney’s Animal Kingdom to Italy is completely out of the question. I don’t care how much he loves okapi. I’m not doing it,” I said.

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Sephie

Vitaliy and Aleksei came with us to the penthouse once we returned from meeting with Battista. Vitaliy declared he was si ck of meeting with people he hadn't seen in years. "There is a reason I haven't seen them in years," he said, grumpily.

Adrik couldn't hide his smile as he looked at me. I think it still surprised him to see this side of his father, but the more he saw it, the more he was enjoying it. It made me happy to see him finally comfortable around his father. I knew he'd spent much of his life feeling intimidated by Vitaliy and worried that he would end up just like him. Now, he was starting to see that wasn't necessarily all bad. Vitaliy had some very good parts to him. He just struggled to show the people he cared about.

"Vitaliy, I think it's time to maybe consider that you are a warm and fuzzy guy. Despite what you think," Stephen said, placing his hand on Vitaliy's shoulder. We could always count on Stephen to be as sarcastic as possible while delivering a heartfelt message.

Vitally cut his eyes over at Stephen as they both laughed. It made my heart so happy to see both of them laughing.

As I made dinner, with everyone's help, Vitaliy and Aleksei both relaxed and talked more than they had previously. They both seemed to genuinely enjoy our company. They entertained us with stories from the days when Vitaliy ruled the city. He gave us funny anecdotes about the current bosses, as well as the bosses before them.

Apparently, Vitaliy had a habit of causing his own chaos between the bosses, just for fun. He finally admitted that he would interfere with the bosses" plans, but make it look like it was one of the other bosses that did it. He liked to keep them fighting among themselves so they would leave him alone.

"Clearly, that's not a lesson I ever learned. I thought keeping the order between them would mean peace in the city," Adrik said, shaking his head at his father's antics.

"Eh, it did mean peace. But there's something about humans that need adversity in order to be happy. If you make conditions too good for too long. people forget what had is. The good starts to feel less good. Sometimes you need bad to remember what good really is," Vitaliy said.

The guys looked at me. I stopped what I was doing and smiled at them all "He speaks no lies."

Viktor caught me to the side of the kitchen while everyone else was deep in discussion after dinner. He gently caught my arm, pulling me toward him He didn't say a word, he just pulled me to him, wrapping his massive arms around me. I knew he was thanking me for baking him a treat and giving him a reminder of the good times of his past.

"She was the secret ingredient, but so are you, sestrichka. I won't say no to those anytime you want to make them," he said softly.

"I'll happily take suggestions for improvements next time, if you want to give them," I said, my arms still wrapped around his neck.

He loosened his hold on me, standing up straighter once more. "They were perfect, Sephie. They were exactly what I needed." He kissed my cheek. before stepping away to join the conversation once more. Stephen caught my eye as Viktor was walking away from me. winked in appreciation for his help in making it happen.

Even though Vitally complained about being in the city, he still stayed for several more days. He kept himself busy during the day. We rarely saw him, but he almost always made it back so he and Aleksei could eat dinner with us each night.

"You know you can tell your other guys they can come up too, I can make more food," I said one night.

Vitaliy and Aleksei looked at each other and laughed. "The two new guys don't want to. I need the other two to keep an eye on them. I don't trust them when they're on their own in a new place," Vitaliy said.

"Unexpected side effect of teaching them manners," Aleksei said.

"If you don't trust them, then why do they work for you?" I asked.

"It's hard to find good people these days. They're better than nothing. For now," Vitaliy said.

Viktor spoke up. "We're still working on getting guys for Trina. I can help you find guys to replace them while you're here, if you like," he said.

Aleksei thought for a minute, looking to Vitaliy as he said, "might be worth a look. If we can find better replacements, we can get rid of the little

flowers."

"You can send them to Turkey. The Ottomans are going to need as much help as they can get soon," Stephen said, completely straight-faced, like it was the honest truth.

Both Vitaliy and Aleksei were shocked, looking to Stephen like he knew something the rest of us didn't. We all tried to hold in the laughter, but we couldn't make it happen. Vitaliy and Aleksei knew something was off, but still had no clue that Vlad wasn't a real, live person and Turkey was safe.

For now.

Later that evening, once the guys had gone back to their apartments downstairs and Vitaliy and Aleksei had retired to their rooms on the other side of the penthouse, I caught Adrik watching me as I undressed for bed. He was leaning against the door to the closet, his sexy smirk on his face.

I watched him, watching me, for a few moments then said, "you don't know whether to be really happy with me or mad at me right now, do you?"

He laughed. "That's exactly what I was thinking. I'm finding myself enjoying spending time with my father. He's completely different than the man I've known my entire life. But I'd also prefer to have the place to ourselves once more. You're terrible at staying quiet," he said, cutting his eyes at me.

"You only have yourself to blame for that one," I said, pulling my shirt over my head, standing in front of him in only my underwear.

"Who said it was a bad thing?" he asked as he walked to me. He ran his hand lightly up my arm to the back of my shoulder as he took another step. now standing behind me. He lightly ran his hand over my back, unhooking my bra. Both hands pushed the straps off my shoulders, causing it to fall to the floor.

I felt his hot breath against my skin as he left gentle kisses across the top of one shoulder, then the other. I could feel his body heat as he moved closer to me, but just far enough away that I couldn't feel his skin on mine yet. His warm hands roamed from my shoulders around to my breasts. He was slow, deliberate in his touch. I could feel his desire, but I could also feel he was trying to contain it.

I knew he was worried about me being able to catch my breath. He was also worried about me staying quiet while we had guests.

His hands massaged my breasts, then slowly traveled down my stomach. He still kept his distance from me. I made a move to lean back against him, but he moved as well. He was enjoying torturing me. He ran his hands over my hips, then back around to my a ss. I felt his lips on my shoulder once

more.

I was starting to breathe harder the longer he kept up his slow torture. Finally, he pulled me back against him. I moaned softly, finally able to feel his warmth against me. He wrapped one arm around my waist, holding me against him. The other ran up in between my breasts to my neck. His touch still soft and slow, he tilted my head to the side giving him full access to my neck. He left a trail of kisses down my neck. I gasped when I felt his teeth graze my neck just above my collarbone.

The hand that was around my waist, moved down my stomach, into my soaking wet panties. When his fingers felt my wetness, he groaned quietly. 1 pushed my hips back into him, leaning my head back on his shoulder. His lips were on my neck once more, his free hand on one of my breasts.

I felt both hands on my hips as he slid my panties down my legs to the floor. His hands slowly running back up my legs. I felt his teeth bite my a ss. He laughed as 1 squealed, jumping away from him.

"You know what trying to get away from me does to me," he said, pulling me back to him.

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Sephte

When he pulled me to him, he turned me to face him. His hands continued to roam slowly over my body, but now I could do the same to his. I could feel his hardness pressed against my stomach. My hands roamed over his chest, his shoulders, down his arms. He grabbed my hands in his, moving my arms behind my back. He held both my arms in one of his hands while the other hand moved to my neck, once again tilting my head to give him full

access.

His grip on my arms was soft, but I didn't like having my arms restricted. I pulled them out of his grip, but he caught them and put them back, holding me a little tighter. His lips went back to my neck. I tried to concentrate on his lips, but all I could think about was having my hands tied behind my back while Armando beat me. I tried to pull my arms free once more, but his grip tightened. I whimpered, my panic fully setting in.

He felt it immediately. "Sephie, what's wrong? Why are you panicking?" he asked. He loosened his grip and I ripped my arms free, hugging my chest. His arms were around me instantly, his voice soft in my ear, telling me that I was safe. I was with him. No one was going to hurt me.

"My arms. I don't like having them behind me. I don't like having them restricted since…" I didn't need to finish. He knew.

"Sephie. Sephie, I'm so sorry. I didn't think…" he said, holding me tightly.

"It's okay. I'm okay. Just not behind me like that."

He put his hand on the back of my neck, pulling me far enough away from him that he could look me in the eyes. The look in his eyes told me my eyes were likely still white. He searched my eyes for a moment, then I saw the look of confusion on his face. "Why are you sad?" he asked as I closed my eyes, trying to get a handle on my emotions.

I stayed quiet for a moment, not sure how to answer his question. I felt so out of control lately. I couldn't get a handle on my fear. Little things would make me panic that never bothered me before. My eyes were doing their own thing. I still worried that the guys were all scared of me because of them. Now I completely killed the mood because of something silly. I knew he wasn't going to hurt me when he was holding my arms. But I couldn't fight off the fear of feeling that vulnerable again.

I felt his fingers under my chin, gently lifting my face. "Sephie, look at me. Please," he said. His voice was soft, but urgent.

1 opened my eyes, letting him search. It only took him a moment. He pulled me close again, hugging me tightly. "You've been through so much. I can't believe you're beating yourself up for struggling with processing everything. This was my fault, Sephie. I didn't think about you not wanting to have your arms behind you. You have a very good reason for not wanting that, I should've known."

"It's okay. I'm okay," I said quietly, my face in his chest.

"It's not and you're not, love. Not all the way. You're dealing with so much just on your own. Not even considering how you're helping everyone around you all the time."

"I want to help them. I don't want them to be scared."

Of me, I wanted to add, but didn't.

-

He pulled me away from him to look at me again. He searched for a few minutes, but didn't respond right away. He picked up his shirt that he had left out for me, holding it out for me. He quietly buttoned it up after I slid my arms through the sleeves. Then he rolled up the too-long sleeves. He reached down, taking my hand and pulled me toward the bedroom with him. He climbed into bed first, then pulled me into his lap so I was straddling him. He looked at me for a few minutes, his hands in their usual battle with my curls before he finally broke the silence.

"Sephle, I don't know what to say to make you believe that we're not scared of you. The things that are happening are strange. It's a lot to take in. But all of it is made so much easier because we all have you to help us through it. If this were happening without you, we would all be admitted to the psych ward. You're what's kept us sane through all of this." He pulled me down, pressing his lips gently to mine for a moment before he continued. "I'm worried that we're depending on you too much, without giving you what you need in return."

n't think that's true. You're all becoming experts at feeling my shifts in mood. Even Stephen, who can't feel what I feel can read toe now, apparently. I think you're putting too much pressure on yourself and the guys," I said. He raised an eyebrow at me. "I've been through some shit,

Adrik. Even without the past I have, just what has happened since I've met you has been a lot. Most of it I'm dealing with and trying to move past, but there's going to be times when something triggers bad memories and feelings. That's unavoidable. Only this time I have you and I have the guys to help me through it when it happens."

He had a small smile on his face as he looked at me. "You always do that," he said quietly.

"Do what?"

"End up making me feel better when I'm trying to make you feel better."

I ran my fingers lightly over his stubble, loving the feel of it against my fingertips. "You do an excellent job of taking care of me. It's not your fault I'm high maintenance," I said, smirking at him.

He laughed loudly. "You're the most low-maintenance woman I've ever met in my entire life. But it makes me love you even more than I thought possible."

I leaned down, putting my head on his shoulder as he ran his hands over my back. I sighed, loving just being close to him. "I love you, Adrik. Always

and forever."

I woke up at some point in the middle of the night to noises coming from the kitchen. I quietly got out of bed and grabbed a pair of leggings before walking out of the bedroom. Vitaliy was in the kitchen rummaging through the cabinets, clearly looking for something.

"Can't sleep and you're looking for something to help you with that?" I asked. I didn't mean to startle him, but I did.

"Sladkaya, what are you doing up? You should be in bed," he said, almost firmly. Like it was an order.

"I could say the same for you. Don't you need more sleep as you get older?" I asked innocently. He squinted his eyes at me as I walked to the cabinet where we kept the tea. I pulled out my favorite tea that helped me sleep. "Don't be grumpy or you'll get none of this and you'll be awake the rest of the night, having no one to blame but yourself."

He laughed, shaking his head. "I didn't know how much I would miss having someone who was never afraid of me."

"I think you've done an excellent job of showing your warm and fuzzy side just since I've known you. You'll have even more friends soon," I said, filling the electric kettle and turning it on.

He scoffed, but then he smiled at me. He looked at me for a few moments. I couldn't be sure, but it looked like there were tears welling up in his eyes. "You've given me a second chance with my son. I wasn't the best father to him the first time around. Maybe I can make up for that, even if it's just a little bit," he said.

I looked at him as we waited for the water to boil. "I think you're being too hand on yourself again, Vitaliy. You did the best you could with what you had at the time. There's a part of him that understands now where your pain came from and he knows he would've been in the same shape you were if the roles were reversed. I can't imagine how difficult it must've been for you to lose your soulmate but have to be reminded of that loss every single time you looked into your son's eyes."

His eyes got wide. "You've seen a picture of Lena?"

I smiled at him. "I've seen Lena. We had a talk when we were still in Panama. I told you she still watches over you," I said, looking at him sternly as I poured the hot water into two mugs.

"How is this possible?"

the logistics are somewhat complicated. She's the person to ask that question to, but she made it happen. She

lways knew I was

was coming for Adrik, but she never realized the role I would play in you life as well." 1

know is th

1. But the important thing for to know is that the is nights when you can't sleep, you should try talking to her. She's y

He sat in silence, mostly stunned at what I'd just told him. I could see his emotions clearly on his face. His cold, tough exterior completely non- existent as he sat in front of me. I suddenly didn't feel like tea anymore. He was still staring at the counter as I walked quietly back to the bedroom.

Halfway down the hallway to the bedroom, I was met by Adrik, leaning against the wall, his arms folded across his chest. He'd been listening to our conversation. He didn't say anything, he just wrapped his arms around me, burying his face in my neck.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 390

390

Adrik

It took me a few days, but I finally managed to talk to my father without Sephie around. I had to enlist the help of all the guys to keep her busy while I had a conversation with him. I wanted to make sure she didn't overhear what I was going to ask him.

"How did you propose to my mother?" I asked him after he walked into my office, closing the door behind him at my request. I'd even asked that Aleksei not be present. He was slightly worried.

He exhaled, the relief visible on his face. He got a sly smile across his face. "I was wondering when you were going to think of this. I was worried you would wait too long."

"I've been thinking about it since right after I met her. I didn't want to scare her by asking her too soon. I've had the ring made for months now. I was going to ask her before she and Ivan were taken. After, she was so hurt that it didn't make sense to ask her then. Now, she's dealing with finally being forced to feel her fear and she's insecure for the first time in her life, I think. I want her to know without a doubt that I'm not going anywhere. Or that the guys aren't either. She's worried they're all afraid of her now."

He scoffed. "How could they be afraid of her?"

"I don't know, but that's what she's worried about. She spends so much time taking care of everyone else, sometimes she forgets to take care of herself. She has six of us that she expertly takes care of, but we have one of her and I feel like we fail miserably most of the time. I want to do something special for her to try and help make up for that."

"That's women, son. That's what they do. Your mother was much the same. Aleksei will tell you. She had a similar bond with him and a few of my men, but not as strong as what Sephie has. My men were not the same. Your mother was not the same. But it was similar enough." He was thoughtful for a moment. "I see why you love her. I haven't met a woman like her, including your mother. When you have a woman like that by your side, you become unstoppable. Everyone worries about men when it comes to business, when it comes to war, politics, all of it. Men are in charge. But it's the women that hold the world together. She's what will hold you and your men together so that you can rule this city the way it should be ran. For the benefit of the people, not only those few in charge. That's what I could never make happen, but you will. With her."

I ended up talking with my father for a few hours. He told me more about my mother in those few hours than he had in 30 years. I knew it was all because of Sephie. She made me see him completely differently than I had when I was growing up. She helped me understand why he did the things he did. I had a new perspective on why he was the way he was when I was a kid. She was right. I would've been the same as him, had the roles been reversed and I had lost her.

Viktor finally stuck his head in the office. "It's getting difficult to keep her from coming down here. She's starting to get worried about you," he said, a small smile on his face.

Vitaliy stood up. "Come. We mustn't make her worry."

It took a few more days to make the plans, with the help of the guys, but we were on our way to the house that weekend and Sephie was none-the wiser. She just thought I wanted a couple nights to ourselves. Which I did, but there was more to it.

I needed her to know, without a doubt that I wasn't going anywhere and that I was never going to send her away from me for any reason ever again. I was tired of waiting for the perfect moment to ask her, so I made my own perfect moment.

The guys did a great job of acting completely normal and coming up with a reason to not go to the house until after dinner. Once there, they all pretended to be very tired and went straight to their rooms, leaving me and Sephie to go upstairs on our own.

She walked into the bedroom, immediately surprised by the candles and the roses that filled the room. She walked a few steps into the room, taking it all in before she turned back to me, I was nervous. I never get nervous. I took the ring out of my pocket as quietly as possible, got down on one

railed for her to turn around.

In't finish her thought when she turned toward me. Her hand went up to cover bet

peechless, It didn't happen often

I also couldn't stay on my knee for very long. It meant I couldn't have my hands on her. Unacceptable. I stood up, grinning at my inability to keep my hands off of her. I pulled her to me. She, of course, immediately picked up on my amusement. "I like this better, too," she said quietly, as I took her hand and slid the ring on her finger.

"Sephie, I've known I was in love with you from the first moment I laid eyes on you. But with each day that passes, you've proven that the love I have for you knows no depths or no bounds. I fall more in love with you each and every day and I want to keep falling in love with you every single day for the rest of this life. And the next. Will you…

She cut me off. She pressed her lips to mine before I could finish. "Don't ask st upid questions," she said, smiling against my lips. I couldn't help but laugh as I kissed her back. I felt the warmth spread over my entire body, warmer than usual even, and I knew her answer was yes. But that didn't mean that I didn't want to hear her say it. I leaned my head back to look at her, about to ask her if that meant yes.

She smiled her wide smile at me. "Of course I will. I want you to be stuck with me too," she said, her arms around my neck. Her eyes were the deepest depth of the ocean blue when she said it, making it mean that much more to me. I wrapped my arms around her, picking her up off the floor, hugging her to me for a few moments.

I felt her let go with one arm, as she looked at the ring on her hand as I held her. "Holy shi t, I'm gonna have to have Bubba's help to build muscles big enough to carry this thing around all day long."

I laughed. God, I love her.

"I wanted it to be very obvious to anyone and everyone that you belong to me, solnishko."

"Message received," she said, hugging my neck tightly once more.

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Chapter 391

391

Sephie

After finally exhausting ourselves that evening, we fell into a tangled mess together on the bed and fell asleep. I knew he wasn't going anywhere. I knew I wasn't going anywhere. But there was a bigger part of me than I realized that felt so much more secure now that he'd made it official.

And boy did he make it official. This ring had its own zip code. But it was absolutely perfect in every way. He'd remembered my joke about black diamonds, so the main stone was a square black diamond, large enough to be seen from space. Pretty sure, anyway. It was surrounded by five smaller rubies, as well as even smaller wh ite diamonds. It was perfect. It was a constant reminder that he, as well as all five of the guys, would always be with

1.

Once asleep, I found myself walking down that same familiar path to that same familiar house. As soon as I looked down and noticed the path, I ran the rest of the way inside, knowing what was waiting on me.

"Dad!" I yelled as I ran through the front door. He could barely stand up from the piano before I smacked into him, wrapping my arms around him.

"Hey, peanut!" he said, his wide smile on his face.

"It's been a long time. I've missed you," I said.

"Oh, I've been around. I check in from time to time. You're not the only one with a whiteboard to keep track of outcomes," he said, a sly smile creeping across his face.

I laughed. He really was where I got most of my humor from. "What was the latest one?"

"We're all waiting on Stephen. He's closer than he's ever been to figuring out his gift, but he hasn't made the jump yet You almost got him to do it the other day, but he's still holding back. I have complete confidence that you'll be able to help him figure it out soon, though. You know, before the end of the month, if you could. Help an old man out and what not…" he said, laughing.

"I'll see what I can do. I didn't know he was that close. I only just got him to open up about his past."

"That's the key, I think. He has to face his past first and then he's ready. Same for Viktor. He has to finally come to terms with his past before he can move forward. They're both closer than they've ever been, though. That's why I'm here, actually."

"To check on your bet pool?"

He laughed. "No. To help you hurry them along. You need them, Sephie. Things are about to get very bad. You're going to need all the help you can get, although you did surprise everyone by bringing Vitaliy along. No one thought you'd be able to do that. Well, I did. Because I know how special you really are. But no one else did. Even Lena was surprised you managed to bring him back from the brink. He's been living in darkness for a very long time, peanut. But he'll prove to be very useful for you in what's coming."

"What's coming? Can you tell me? Is it Sal?"

"I'm technically not supposed to interfere. I can nudge you along, like I've been doing, but the future is dependent on decisions made in the present. I'm not allowed to interfere with those decisions. Them's the rules. But what I can tell you is that you will succeed, but you have to stick together and you have to rely on each other. More than you ever have before. You've all done quite a good job at handling what life has thrown at you so far. It's going to get even more weird, but it wouldn't happen if you couldn't handle it."

"What about Viktor though? I'm worried about him. He seems the most unsure out of all of them. I think I scare him now."

"It's not you, peanut. It's his potential. That's what scares him. He sees it in you, but can't see it in himself. It'll come. You'll help him, just as you've helped the others. But you have to start believing in yourself again. You got knocked down; almost farther than I've ever seen you get knocked this bist time. But you got back up. When you feel your fear and panic threatening to take over, remember that. Not once have

Is just excitement, without the breath. Breathe into your fear, peanut. That's what you're missing. That's what Adrik has been trying to help

con channel your fear, the same way you've learned to channel your anger. You're going to need it. Fear and

to be. Use them to your advantage.?

I was quietly contemplating what he'd just told me. "What about my eyes? Why do they have a mind of their own now?"

He chuckled. "You were right, peanut. They're your warning system. You used them correctly when Sal and Armando took you and Ivan. They're th reason Sal never came back. He ordered Armando to take care of you because he was terrified of you. He still has nightmares where he wakes up in cold sweat after seeing your face and your black eyes in that room. That's also the reason Armando was so savage with you. He was terrified of you and tried to cover it up with his anger. You almost saw through it, but your fear was stronger than you realized when it was happening. Learn to control your fear and you're unstoppable."

"But my lung. I still can't catch my breath and then I panic."

"I know a certain acupuncturist that can help with that. Andrei was right, too. It's more to do with your anxiety about not being able to breathe tha it is your lung."

"What about Ivan and Andrei? Was Adrik right? Ivan can see evil and Andrei can see good?"

"He was right. He's becoming quite astute to all of this going on. The four of you complement each other, balance each other. Adrik can feel good an evil, just as you can. You just feel it in different ways. Ivan can see evil, just as Andrei can see good. They just see it in different ways. You can use this. Misha is there to tie it all together. Stephen and Viktor will fit nicely into the puzzle as well once they figure out their gifts. You all have a speci role to play in what's coming. The key is Ricardo. Sal is a pawn for Ricardo, peanut. Ricardo is worse than you could imagine and will become more s if you don't stop him. Same for Martin. They've both made deals that have everlasting consequences."

I chewed on my bottom lip as I thought about everything he was telling me. He smiled down at me sweetly. "It's a lot, I know. But I'm always around. Ivan is doing a fantastic job. So are Andrei and Misha. They're all more connected to you than I think you realize yet. Soon Viktor and Stephen will be too. You need each other. But right now, you need to go back. Adrik is awake and can't leave you. I didn't look, but I know you're not exactly decent s he can't take you downstairs with him."

He tried to hide his grin, but he couldn't. "Dad!" I said, completely embarrassed.

"You're an adult, peanut. You do adult things. But that doesn't mean I can't laugh about it," he said, snickering.

I hid my face in my hand. "I can't believe this," I said under my breath, but I couldn't help but laugh at the absurdity of it all.

He leaned down and kissed my forehead. "I love you, peanut. And it's obvious to literally every being in the universe that Adrik loves you now too," he said, pointing to my ring. Huh, it showed up in my dream too. "Of course it did," he said, like he was reading my mind. "It has special meaning to you, as well as them. Think of it like your pinky swears you have with most of them. Funny how you haven't made a pinky swear with Stephen and Viktor yet…"

Just as I was about to say something, he disappeared and everything faded to black in front of me. I was aware of Adrik's hand running lightly over my back. He felt me start to stir. "Good morning, love. Were you having a dream? You were laughing," he said, his wide smile on his face when I picked my head up off his chest to look at him.

"Mmm hmm. I was talking to my dad who informed me that you were trying to wake me up because you couldn't leave me since I was na ked. Do normal people get embarrassed by their fathers in their dreams too or is that just me?"

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Sephie

“And what insight did your father have this time?” he asked, as he rolled us both over so he was laying on top of me. I could tell by his expression that my eyes were changing.

“Are they swirling?” I asked, curious. He nodded, but it was clear he was still fascinated by them. I giggled. “He said that we were right about them. They really are my warning system. He said Sal still wakes up in a cold sweat thinking about my black eyes. Not gonna lie, that makes me really happy.”

He chuckled. “Me too. It’s probably why Armando gets angry anytime your name is mentioned, as well.”

I looked at him, my fingers running lightly over his face. “My dad did say that you’re becoming quite astute to everything that’s happening,” I said, grinning at him. “He said Armando was terrified of me and that’s why he was so savage. Apparently, he’s still terrified.”

“He should be,” Adrik said, his anger slowly rising to the surface. I put my hand on the back of his neck, pulling him down to me. I didn’t want to think about all that first thing in the morning. Especially not this morning.

He buried his face in my neck, his rough facial hair rubbing lightly against my skin. “You’re right. We shouldn’t be thinking about that so early in the morning,” he said. His hand moved to my breast, squeezing it to illustrate his point.

“You’re getting better at knowing what I’m thinking without even having to search my eyes,” I said. He went to move his hand from my breast, but I caught it and put it back.

“I need to stay ahead of the guys,” he said, picking his head up and grinning at me.

“They’re about to give you a run for your money, apparently. I figured out the key to getting Stephen and Viktor to realize their gifts. That was why my dad came to me. He’s trying to hurry us along. He said we’re going to need them soon.”

“I’m not sure I like the sound of that, but I have total confidence that you’ll find the right things to say to them to get them to figure out their gifts. Just not right at this moment. First, I need to hear you scream. Then breakfast. Then maybe I’ll have you for second breakfast. We’ll see,” he said, his lips on my neck as his hand ran down my stomach to my inner thighs. He lightly ran his hands over my thigh, as he moved one of his legs in between mine, pulling my leg around his waist. I moved my hips against his, already wanting him inside me. I would never get enough of him.

“I like your plans for the morning. I approve of your plans for the morning,” I said, already breathing heavier as his lips were on my neck. I raked my nails over his back, eliciting a low groan from him.

He moved on top of me, wrapping my other leg around his waist. “I don’t think I will ever tire of waking up this way. We can do this every single day for the rest of our lives and I’d be very happy about that,” he said as he rubbed the tip of his coc k along my folds, teasing me. I pushed my hips into him, trying to get him to slide inside me. “I love that you’re so eager, my love,” he said, his voice husky with desire.

“I can’t help it. I can’t get enough of you,” I said, breathlessly. He enjoyed winding me up.

“I hope you never do,” he said as he slammed into me before stilling to let me adjust. I moaned loudly at the intense pleasure of him filling me up. I moved my hips, grinding against him, loving the gentle friction. He groaned against my neck as my pu ssy clenched around him. His hand moved to my thigh, pulling my leg tighter around him as he bucked his hips into mine. Another moan escaped my lips, causing him to exhale. I knew he was slowly losing his control. I was happily waiting for it to happen.

I put my lips close to his ear, almost whispering, “I love when you lose control. He sat up enough that he could look me In the eyes. He searched my eyes for a moment, then I saw his sexy smirk on his face. His lips crashed into mine, claiming every inch of my mo uth as his. Every inch of my body as his. Every piece of my soul as his.

The guys were making breakfast when we finally made it downstairs. They all had very sweet smiles on their faces, as they knew what had happened the night before. It was kind of adorable to see these giant men excited that their boss had officially claimed his girlfriend as his future wife.

“Come on, princess. Let’s see it,” Ivan said, motioning for me to show him the ring. I held it up so they could all see it, a goofy grin on my face. They all moved to surround me, getting a closer look. They’d all seen it, I was sure, but they were acting like it was the first time. I might’ve loved them all a little more for it. Ivan put his arm around my shoulder. “You’re officially stuck with all of us now, princess,” he said, smirking at me.

“I could think of much worse things in the world, Squish,” I said, wrapping my arms around his waist. “I know you had a very big part in this, too. I might love you a little more for it.”

“I’m just glad I don’t have to hide it any longer. I’ve been holding onto that thing for a while now. I was getting paranoid you were going to see it somehow or see me thinking about it and find out about it,” Ivan said.

“She saw the plans for it on my desk one day, but didn’t catch on. You were safe, but I agree. It’s becoming increasingly difficult to surprise her,” Adrik said.

“You did with this one. I had no clue. I keep trying to tell you I don’t pry. I don’t think you believe me,” I said, smacking Ivan’s arm. “But I am going to need extra training from Bubba to be strong enough to carry this thing around all day. This arm is gonna be like twice the size of my other one.”

“Job security, spider monkey. That’s why it’s that big. That was my decision,” Andrei said, grinning at me.

I laughed, leaving Ivan to go to Andrei. I wrapped my arms around him as he picked me up off the floor. “I love you all. I hope you know that.”

“We love you; Sephie. We’re not going anywhere. Now you have a constant reminder that you’re stuck with all of us,” Stephen said.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 393

393

Sephie

I watched Stephen look at the message that just came through on his phone. His face went wh ite. I think he might’ve forgotten to breathe even. Whatever news he just got was not good news.

“Yoden?” I asked quietly, trying to snap him out of it. “What’s wrong?”

He was staring at his phone, but he slowly raised his gaze to look at me. His eyes were wide, not in shock. He was afraid. I dropped what I was doing and went to him. “Stephen? What happened? What’s going on? Talk to me,” I said, reaching out for his arm. When I touched his arm, I got hit with hi memories. All of them. Every dark detail he never wanted me to know. Every time his sisters abused him and tortured him in the worst way possible, humiliating him for the sheer joy of it. I saw everything. I felt everything.

I didn’t mean to. I’d never had it happen like that before. I wasn’t actively searching his mind. I was trying to comfort him. I felt tears burning my eyes as I went to move my hand from his arm, apologizing. I wasn’t sure if he knew that I’d just seen everything he never wanted me to see. He caught my hand, holding it in place, but still not yet meeting my gaze.

“They’re coming to the city. I never thought they would actually come here, but they’ll be here in two days. They want to see me. I haven’t seen them in years. I don’t know if I can face them,” he said. He still hadn’t looked at me, but he wouldn’t let go of me either.

I sat down next to him, putting my other hand on top of his, resting my head on his shoulder. “You don’t have to see them. You can tell them to f**k off. You don’t owe them anything,” I said.

He was quiet for a moment, contemplating like he always did. “I think about what I’ll say to them when I’m forced to see them again. Each time I think about telling them off. Each time I think about pulling all of their demonis out and putting them on full display for everyone to see. I think about breaking their minds the same way they tried to break mine.” He sighed. “And every time I can’t do it. I go back to that quiet kid that was terrified of his sisters.”

I rested my chin on his shoulder, looking at him, fighting his memories. “I’ll be with you the whole time. You don’t even have to say anything. I’ll happily say it for you. I’d love nothing more than to destroy them so completely they never want to see you again and they leave questioning their entire existence.”

He chuckled. “I might pay to see that.”

“I will happily do it,” I said, my anger oozing out. I didn’t have my contacts in, so he saw my eyes go dark when he glanced at me.

“Huh. I didn’t think I’d miss seeing your eyes change, but I kinda miss your demon eyes. That’s such weird thing to say, now that I say it out loud.”

I smiled at him, chewing on my bottom lip. I was trying to calm down so the other guys wouldn’t come rushing in. I wanted a few more minutes alone with Stephen.

*Yoden, I don’t want to fr eak you out, but when I touched your arm, I got a full view into your head. I didn’t mean to. I wasn’t trying to, it just happened. I saw everything,” I said, tentatively.

“I know you did. I wanted you to. It’s easier than me having to tell you. I’ve found having to say the words is harder than anything,” he said. “I wasn’ sure it would work, but clearly it did.

My heart just broke for him. He’d been carrying this around with him for so long with no one to talk to about it. His sisters were truly well, “de parents know?” I asked quietly,

Talthfully

“I have thought about that, as wel. It makes me wonder if that’s why I ended up in the career path I’m in. Maybe I would’ve been an accountant otherwise,” he said, finally looking at me. A sly grin on his face.

“An accountant that murders numbers,” I said, unable to contain my laughter at my corny joke. He laughed quietly, but he was still struggling to get a handle on his emotions.

“What do they want while they’re here? Like do you just have to suffer through dinner with them? What’s the plan and how can we make this the most uncomfortable visit to the city they’ve ever had?” I asked.

“They’ll want to spend time with me while they’re here, I’m sure. I don’t think I’ll get by with just a dinner.”

“I’ll be there every time you have to see them,” I said. He looked at me, somewhat surprised, which made me laugh. “Don’t be surprised. There’s no way I’m letting you face them on your own. Pinky swear, even.”

His look of surprise only grew on his face, “What’s that?”

I grinned. “You’re in for a treat, Yoden. The pinky swear is the holiest of holy swears there is. All the gods, goddesses, demi-gods, and holy men were polled on what the holiest swear is and 7 out of 10 agree that the pinky swear is where it’s at. The other three were promptly thrown into the pits of He ll for disagreeing, but that’s neither here nor there.”

He finally laughed. “Okay, so how does one go about making this holiest of holy swears?”

I put my pinky out in front of him. “Give me your pinky,” I said. I hooked my pinky around his once he put it out in front of him. “I pinky swear that you will never have to face the demons of your past, present, and future alone ever again.”

He smiled as he looked at our pinkies, still hooked together. “And I pinky swear you’ll never have to face your demons alone ever again too.”

I grinned at him, loving that he indulged me, but also knowing this was the first step to getting him to realize his full potential. I leaned my head over to his shoulder once more. “You’re my favorite. Don’t tell the others.”

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Adrik

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I had talked Sephie into taking a bath. She was stressed, but she wouldn't tell me why in front of the other guys. I'd felt her anger briefly that afternoon, but she wouldn't come clean on why that happened either. I knew she'd tell me once we were alone. Or I could fish it out of her head. The more I practiced, the better I got at reading her. There wasn't much she could get by me now.

"Do you want to talk about what's bothering you, love?" I asked after she'd been quiet for a few minutes. She was enjoying my hands on her body. I could feel her relax more the longer we stayed in the hot water.

She sighed. "I know Stephen's past now. I had my suspicions after I got him to open up to me the other day, but he somehow managed to share all his memories with me when I touched his arm today. I saw everything. What's worse is I felt everything he felt while it was happening. I don't know how I managed to get through it without breaking down or why I haven't broken down since," she said. I heard her sniffle once, but she continued. "He's so insanely private that I don't want to tell you too much out of respect for him, but it's bad. His sisters are evil. I legit asked if I could kill them today. Like, for real. I'd do it and not think twice about it."

I could feel her anger starting to rise. It felt different than her normal anger. It almost felt more like mine. There was more chaos to her anger than usual.

"How did he share all his memories with you?" I asked. This seemed like it was different from how Sephie usually got information from people.

"I have no idea. He was frozen in terror because he'd just gotten a message that his sisters are coming to the city in two days. He's terrified to see them. I went to comfort him and I saw everything. It went from him not wanting me in his head at all to him sharing literally every detail with me. He said he was trying to share it with me. That it's easier than having to tell me what happened."

"What do his sisters want when they come here? He knows he doesn't have to see them, right?" I asked. I'd never once heard Stephen talk about his sisters. I didn't even know he had sisters until Sephie told me.

"I told him the same thing, but I just have this feeling like he needs to see them. I think on some level he does too, but he's understandably scared. I told him I'd be with him the entire time. He shouldn't face them alone. I'd also love a reason to punch them, sooooo I'm hoping that happens," she said. I could hear the smile in her voice when she said it.

"We will all be with him. If they're as bad as you say they are, then we'll all help him face them. I can throw them out of the city and make sure they never return as well. I can give shoot on sight orders," I offered. She giggled, wrapping my arms around her. "I'm serious. I can feel your anger. It's different with this. It feels more like mine, which means you're having trouble controlling it. That never happens. I don't need details to know this very serious and that you're feeling very protective of him."

She sighed, hugging my arms that were tight around her. "I love you."

I leaned down, kissing her neck. "I love you, solnishko. And I love that you love my men as much as you do, too. It's very endearing that you're as protective of them as you are. You have no idea how adorable you are," I said, not able to hide my smile as she giggled again, her body finally relaxing.

Sephie asked me to call Ivan to the penthouse before everyone else came up for breakfast. "I know he'll be up. He's a complete psycho that wakes up at the ungodly hour of 4 like every day. I want to talk to him alone before everyone else comes up. I think he can help with Stephen's situation."

1 sent a quick text to Ivan the night before, making sure he was in the kitchen before everyone else. Vitaliy and Aleksel were usually the last to come out, so we didn't need to worry about them. He looked somewhat concerned when we came out of the bedroom, wondering why he'd been summoned. His face softened when Sephie smiled at him as she walked to him,

"Good morning, Squish," she said, as he wrapped his arms around her engulfing her completely as he hugged her.

"Princess, Wanna tell me why I've been summoned?" he asked, a small grin on his face.

She stopped back from him, already chewing on her bottom lip. We both felt her mood shift quickly. "Uh oh. That's not good. What's going on?" he

now clearly worried. We could both feel her anger coming on once more.

"So, it was slightly different, but Stephen shared all of his memories with me yesterday. I know everything. I felt everything." She paused, clearly trying to maintain control of herself, "His sisters are completely evil. I don't want to say much more than that, as he's so insanely private. The issue that his sisters are coming to the city. They'll be here tomorrow. He's terrified to see them. I told him he won't have to face them alone and I know a of you will agree

with that. I think he needs to face them. I keep getting the feeling that it's what's holding him back. I really need your help to bring out their demons for everyone to see. It's probably going to be horrific, but I think we need to help him face them. Can you…"

He put his hand up, stopping her. "Say no more. You never have to ask me if I'm willing to make bitchy girls uncomfortable. That answer is always going to be a yes," he said.

She smiled at him, but it was short-lived. "These are more than just bitchy girls, Squish. I'm thinking what happened with Battista's associate at the hotel might happen again. As much as I don't want you to go through that again, I think it'll be what Stephen needs to see happen to give him the strength to cut them out of his life for good."

"If I know there's a chance it'll happen, I can at least be prepared. The surprise at the hotel didn't help," he said.

"You know I'll be there for you, but I'm also very worried about Stephen. He went white when he got their message yesterday. He couldn't speak for a few minutes."

"If you keep your anger the way it feels right now, it'll cancel out everything else. It feels different," Ivan said.

I looked at him, agreeing. "It feels more chaotic, right? Like it feels like mine does, not hers."

He nodded his head. "Yeah, this is a new level. Even more so than what she feels with Sal. I said it feels like she'll burn the world to get to Sal, but this feels even worse than that."

"Like I want to rip their souls out and deliver them to Hell myself," Sephie said quietly, her eyes completely black.

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Adrik

Sephie's anger levels stayed at a smoldering level throughout the day. Andrei and Misha felt the difference, both asking me about it instead of asking

her.

"Boss, is Sephie okay? She feels different and not necessarily in a good way," Andrei asked when he and Misha walked into my office. Sephie had taken Stephen upstairs to help her, before any of the others could offer. She also asked me to keep them as busy as possible so she could have a little extra time with Stephen.

"Close the door," I said.

Misha closed it, now concerned. "What's going on, Boss?"

"Sephie found out about Stephen's past. I don't know details but it has to do with his sisters, who will be here tomorrow. Her anger is justifiable, but it's different than it normally feels. It has me worried, to be honest. Her anger feels like mine. It's very chaotic, which means she's struggling to control it," I said.

"Does he have to see his sisters when they're here? I mean, if it's that bad, why not just tell them to f**k off?" Misha asked.

"I said the same thing. So did she, but she also feels like Stephen needs to confront them. She feels like this is what's holding him back from realizing what his gift is," I said.

"What does he need from us?" Andrei asked.

"He's not going anywhere near his sisters without all of us with him. I think we're going to have to keep an eye on her to keep her from snapping his sisters' necks. She already asked him if she could ki ll them and she wasn't joking. Other than that, I think we let it play it out. Between Ivan and Sephie, those girls don't stand a chance. I think Stephen might need to see his sisters for who they really are for once, instead of the monsters he remembers from his childhood."

Misha clapped his hands, rubbing them together. "I love a good unraveling."

That night, Stephen told everyone that his sisters were coming. He didn't go into details, but he made it obvious that he was not in any way excited to

see them.

"Don't worry, man. We're going with you. Or are they coming here?" Andrei asked.

"Noooo. They aren't coming anywhere close to here. There's no way in he ll I would tell them where I live," Stephen said. I had to admit to being slightly relieved about that. "I'm supposed to meet them for dinner tomorrow night. Surprisingly, they're staying at Battista's hotel."

I knew how I could help. Sephie caught my mood shift and glanced at me, searching for her answer to her silent question. She didn't say anything, but she added her own plans on top of it. We silently had a conversation that no one else in the room was aware of and I loved every second of it.

Later, once we were alone, I made sure I read her correctly. "I just want to make sure I'm correct. You caught my idea about the hotel?"

"I did. Battista seems to be very willing to help us out, but mostly because he thinks there's something special about you and I that can be useful to

him

for that, then we

"You're okay with him seeing your eyes?"

okay with acaring the ever-loving shi t out of Stephen's sisters. If Battista helps us out and seeing my eyes is the payment for with it. Vitally can see too. He doesn't know about them yet either," she said. She was chewing on her bottom lip,

the are you thinking about?"

"I wish there was a way to push everything I felt when he shared his memories with me onto them. I don't usually get emotions with memories like that, but it was very clear that I was experiencing it as he did, feelings and all, I want them to feel what he felt. I want them to know that pain. I want. it to haunt them the same way it has him. They're the ones that need to carry that burden, not him."

"I agree with you, but I don't know how to make that happen. Nor do I want you to hurt yourself by trying to make something happen that shouldn't. happen. You could push your anger to Andrei and Misha, but you're also connected to them. You don't have that connection with Stephen's sisters, so I don't know that it would work the same with them."

"I know. That's what I can't figure out. Doesn't mean I still can't wish for it to happen, though."

I pulled her to me, kissing her gently. "I have no doubt you will figure out how to make them suffer as much as possible while in your presence." I had a small grin on my face, as I was loving the thought of being able to witness it, "Let me call Battista before it gets too late, love. Don't stress about this too much. Otherwise we'll have Ivan and the Wonder Twins back up here because they're worried you're going to burn the building down."

She cut her eyes at me, a sly smile curling up one side of her plump lips. "Call. Battista. I won't burn anything down in the meantime," she said. God, I

love her.

Battista answered promptly when I called him. I told him as few details as I could while still explaining the situation to him. He was understandably hesitant, so I sweetened the deal for him. "You think there's something special about Sephie and 1, don't you?" I asked. I heard him inhale. Then silence. "You'll be able to answer that question if you make this happen."

"The restaurant is yours," he said. "I look forward to seeing you tomorrow."

The next morning, I told Vitaliy what was happening. "There's more to Sephie that you still don't know about. She plans on using it on Stephen's sisters tonight, but we needed Battista's restaurant to give us a somewhat private venue to make it happen. His sisters aren't coming here to the building. We told Battista he'd be able to answer his questions about us if he makes it happen. He agreed. You'll also get a show if you join us," I said.

"What more can she do?" Vitaliy asked.

"You'll see," I said, a smirk on my face.

He scoffed. "Now Battista is going to want to stay here longer. He drags me to so many lunches," he said, rolling his eyes.

I chuckled. "You've already stayed much longer than you'd planned anyway. What's a little longer?"

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Sephie

Stephen had been nervous most of the day. I couldn't say I blamed him, either. When it finally came time to leave for the hotel, he looked like he might back out. "What if I tell them I'm si ck?" he asked.

"You can tell them you're si ck. You don't have to see them this time, but you're also just pushing off the inevitable. They're going to keep coming back every few years. You'll keep having this same reaction every few years, too. Or, you can go tonight, let us back you up, and see that your sisters are not as scary as you remember," I said. "And maybe get some enjoyment out of me punching them. I don't know. We'll see what happens."

He laughed. "Okay, okay. I'll go." He slid his arm around my shoulders. "Thank you," he said, quiet enough that only I could hear.

"We're all here for you, Yoden. Vlad would be here too, but he got caught up at customs. I keep telling him to make different shipping arrangements for himself but he never listens."

He laughed again. "He is very stubborn," he said, as he shook his head.

We purposely arrived early so that we would already be at the restaurant when his sisters arrived. They were noticeably shocked that we were the only ones in the restaurant. We were waiting for them at the front of the restaurant, to make it easier for us to be closer to Stephen when he had to see them. To them, it looked like we were all enjoying a drink before dinner. In reality, we were all sipping on water, waiting for their unraveling, as Misha put it.

"Is the restaurant open?" one of his sisters asked. I didn't know their names. Much like Vitaliy's men, I didn't want to know their names.

"No, we had it closed," Stephen said.

"Why?" she asked.

"To make it easier."

"Easier for what?"

"For me to be here. For him to be here. And for him to be here," Adrik said, pointing to Vitaliy and Battista. While Adrik was capable of coming across as friendly, he was not putting one ounce of effort into it with these three. He had his intimidation factor up as high as it would go when he addressed her.

"Oh," was all she said. The other two sisters stayed quiet, but I could already feel their displeasure at being spoken to that way. Clearly, they had no idea who Adrik was.

When they walked in, Ivan had glanced at them. I watched him as he watched them. I saw the look of surprise flash across his face as he looked at one of them in particular, I had a feeling I knew what he saw and I also had a feeling that was the middle sister that he was looking at. I caught his eye, raising my eyebrow at him. He discreetly pointed out the one he saw something on and shook his head no discreetly. He was in much better control this time than he was when we met Battista's associate, but I still pushed a little of my anger to him for good measure. I was trying to keep it to low levels for now, as I left my contacts at home. I didn't want my eyes changing just yet. Ivan was getting so sensitive to my moods that he still felt it. He gave me a sly wink in appreciation.

Stephen introduced everyone quickly, but I still didn't pay attention to their names. I would never care to know their names. I only cared that this was the only time I ever had to see them.

As we sat down, his sisters seemed pleasant enough, but I could easily tell it was all an act. I caught Andrel's eyes go wide a few times at he some of their thoughts as well. Rude didn't even begin to describe what they were thinking. One of them, I'm gues disrespectful in her thoughts about literally every single one of the guys. Her mind was so far in the gutter as soon

Anny. I would say her panties were wet as soon as she saw so many men, but she wasn't wearing

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But they all wore fake smiles and had fake manners at the beginning of dinner. I was sure it wouldn't last. Once the initial awkwardness wore off, we all started talking and laughing like normal. Vitaliy knew enough of what was going on that he asked plenty of questions to keep the conversation going, as did Battista. I could tell that Battista was catching my eyes changing just enough that he thought he might be noticing something, but he wasn't sure. We kept the conversation light, so they hadn't gone dark, but I was sure they'd switched from blue to green to normal a few times.

We were also speaking English, so Battista could understand the conversation. I caught the sisters conversing among themselves a few times in Russian, but I wasn't close enough that I could understand them. We finally told a story that involved Stephen's greatness. He really had saved everyone's as ses, but I might've fawned over him and maybe embellished just a bit. The guys knew what was happening. They all backed me up. It wa exactly what was needed.

I saw the middle sister get quiet, her face turned sour. I watched Ivan as he looked at her. It was plainly on his face that he wasn't seeing her face any longer. I very quietly pointed it out to Stephen, who could also plainly see it on Ivan's face that something had changed with her. She said something quietly to the youngest sister, but loud enough that the rest of us heard her speaking. She said it in Russian, thinking I wouldn't be able to understan

her.

I kindly asked her in English to repeat herself. She did. In Russian. She said she knew I was lying because there was no way Stephen could ever do anything right. I caught Stephen shrinking back beside me. I knew he was reliving her insults as a kid. I kept my fake smile plastered on my face, as I asked her in Russian to please tell me of her accomplishments that were better than saving everyone's lives.

I could feel the excitement of the rest of the guys as they knew what was about to happen. It almost made me laugh. I had to admit that I was looking.

forward to it, as well.

Her face fell slightly, when she learned I could speak Russian, but she doubled down. "I don't need to tell you anything. Silence is better than lies."

This bi tch.

I was working hard to keep my eyes from changing. It wasn't time yet. Not yet.

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Sephie

“So, let me see if I have this straight,” I said, in English once again, so Battista could understand. “You think that there’s no possible way your brother could’ve accomplished even half of what we’ve been talking about tonight?” She stayed silent, but she didn’t object. “Well, that stands to reason then, that you think this because you feel superior to him in some way. If you feel superior to him, then it must mean you have accomplishments that overshadow his, yet you can’t seem to come up with a single one to wow us with. Yet, I’m the one that’s lying?”

There were a few coughs and laughs from the guys, who were trying to hold it in, but just couldn’t. She looked around at them, realizing they were laughing at her. She started to squirm slightly in her seat. I might’ve enjoyed that.

“Please, tell me. How long have you had the job you’re at now? And what is it you do?” I asked, trying to appear curious and not seething. She was starting to get angry, but she wasn’t at the level I needed her to be at yet.

When she stayed silent, I poked her harder. “And what of your husband? What is he? Number four? Is that right? What happened to the first three?” I asked, crossing my arms across my chest, enjoying watching her get angrier and angrier.

The youngest sister tried to come to the defense of her older sister, but it was weak. I focused on her. “Do you really want to play this game, little girl? Do we need to talk about why you haven’t married yet or better yet, why you have to keep moving to larger cities to escape your reputation?” That shu t her up and even got a tricker out of the oldest sister “Oh, don’t think you’re immune from my charms, either,” I said, addressing the oldest sister. “Those two are bad, but you’re no better Arguably worse, I’d say “The oldest sister looked at me, wide-eyed, then looked at Stephen. She knew in that moment that he’d told me everything. The other two hadn’t caught on yet, but the oldest sister knew. I watched the color drain from her face.

The middle sister had been string in her own anger during all of this. She finally exploded. She slammed her hand down on the table, causing the youngest sister to jump in fright “Enough! You can’t speak to me that way. You’re obviously too st upid to see how much of an im becile my brother is and you’re making up lies to try and make him seem more important than he is

I glanced briefly at the guys during her little outburst. Every single one of them had their hackles up. I could feel Adrik’s anger, as well. I knew my eyes were about to go dark. I just hoped they went black I wanted her scared.

I put my palms down on the table, as I slowly stood up. I was looking down when I stood up, so she couldn’t see my eyes yet, nor could anyone else. kept my palms on the table, so I could lean over, getting even closer to her

“I can speak to a piece of shi t like you however I go dda mn please. And if you ever take that tone with me again, you will regret it for the rest of your very short life.” My voice was loud enough everyone could hear, but it was controlled. I sounded as calm as possible, but my tone was daring her to yell at me again. I could see the fear in her eyes as she looked at me, but she couldn’t look away. While my anger was at an in sane level, I was also concentrating on everything I felt when Stephen shared his memories with me. I used it as fuel for my fire, but I also desperately wanted to find a way to push it to her. I wanted her to break right in front of me. “You have the audacity to think that your brother would even want to see you, for one. Then you come here, insult me not once, but twice, and you insult him in front of his real family, who coincidentally can end you and make it appear like you never existed. I think it’s clear that you’re the im becile here.”

I paused, wanting to see if she could come up with a response. She hadn’t looked away from my eyes. It was like she was frozen in place, unable to speak, unable to move. The youngest sister once again tried to stick up for her sister. “You’re not his real family. We’re his real family,” she said.

I laughed. I turned from the middle sister, focusing all my anger on the youngest. She was nervous when I first stood up. Now, she was terrified. “You really think he wants to claim a fil thy piece of trash like you? You realize you don’t get extra points for having all the sexually transmitted diseases, right? I almost feel sorry for you. You’re so lost in trying to prove your worth to your bi tch of a sister that you lost yourself somewhere along the way, Instead of having the strength to stand up to her, you turned into her and you ha te yourself for it. I don’t blame you there. I ha te you too.” She was now frozen in place as well, but she was making noises. Like she was crying. Or whining. Or both.

The oldest sister looked at Stephen. She was now angry as well. I stood up, crossing my arms acro Stephen, then to me. “I don’t know what he’s told you, but it’s all lies,” she half-yelled.

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been consumed by her demon since she was a baby. You probably had something to do with that too, as I’m guessing you were very jealous of her when she was born.” I pointed to the youngest sister who was clearly struggling internally, but unable to move. “She’s an id iot that just wants to be loved. She might’ve turned out to be a very sweet girl, but you made sure she’ll never amount to anything.” I finally stared at her, my anger only slightly subsiding. “But you. You’re the worst of them. You let unspeakable things happen. Not because you didn’t care. Not because you didn’t know it was happening. No, you knew all along. You wanted it to happen. You thought if your siblings could f**k each other up enough, you’d turn out to be the brightest and your parents would love you the most. You’re pa thetic and quite frankly, I don’t want to look at you any further.”

Adrik stood up, standing behind me. I felt his hand on my waist. He looked down at Stephen, who looked grateful, then back to the oldest sister. ‘You’ve seen Stephen for the last time. You’ve also come to this city for the last time. Take your sisters. You have 24 hours to leave this city. If any of you are seen in this city again, you’ll be shot on sight. This is my city. Stephen is my family. I protect my family.” I could feel his anger feeding into mine and I knew he was looking at her with every ounce of intimidation he had in him. She looked terrified.

She looked at Stephen, like he was going to argue. He stared at her for long enough that I wasn’t sure he was going to answer. Finally, he said, “oh, I’m sorry. You’re expecting me to step in here? Nah. I’m good. I’ll let you learn what it feels like to fend for yourself.”

Ivan looked at his watch, then to the oldest sister, as the other two were still stuck in their own minds. I saw a brief flash of surprise on his face, but he quickly masked it. “You better get a move on. The clock is ticking. That 24 hours is gonna go by real fast.” He pointed to the other two. “And it looks like your travel companions have some special needs that are going to need to be addressed.”

She looked at her sisters, pulling both of them out of their chairs. They readily stood up and went with her, but neither spoke and neither looked like they had a clue what was happening. I caught Andrei’s eye when they walked past him. The look on his face told me he had snooped. Maybe it did work…

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 398

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Adrik

I could feel Sephie's emotions were everywhere all at once as she was trying to goad Stephen's sisters into an outburst. I know she was still trying to figure out a way to push all the pain and hurt she got from Stephen to his sisters. I also knew that Ivan, Misha, and Andrei were feeling much the same as I was. I wasn't sure if it would work to push our anger to her, but we tried it. She was so adept at controlling her anger. It was like it had the opposite effect on her as it did everyone else. It calmed her. She could almost think clearer when her anger levels were extremely high, especially when she had to deal with her fear and panic. Both of those emotions were coming up for her when she thought about what she felt from Stephen. If we could help her keep her anger high and controlled, then she could concentrate on figuring out a way to push everything to his sisters, effectively breaking them.

It was a brilliant plan. We just weren't exactly sure on how to make it happen or if it would work going into this dinner.

Judging by the state that two of the sisters were in when they left, I'd say it worked. I'd even go so far as to say it worked better than we dreamed possible. There was much to discuss later.

Battista was stunned, as was Vitaliy. He hadn't seen Sephie's eyes until now. When she looked at me after Stephen's sisters left, they were still black. I kissed her forehead. "Take a breath, love. It's over now," I said, keeping my lips against her forehead. She leaned against me, closing her eyes for a moment. When she opened them again, they were the deepest depth of the ocean blue.

"I know what you did. Thank you," she said as she smiled sweetly at me. I leaned down and pressed my lips to hers, pulling her chair out so she could sit back down. As she did, she leaned over to Stephen. "How you doin? You okay? Was it too much? I might've gotten a little carried away there," she said, trying to make him laugh.

He turned to look at her, speaking quietly, but I could still hear him. "It was perfect, Seph. I think I know what you did, but we'll talk later. My m om is gonna be so pi ssed," he said, shaking his head. He caught my arm as I was pushing in Sephie's chair. "Thank you," he said.

"Anything for family, Stephen."

We finished dinner, with Battista and Vitaliy asking plenty of questions. As usual, Sephie kept the focus on her when Battista was around. He suspected there was something different about me still, but I was hoping he didn't have any idea about the guys. I wasn't sure I wanted him to know about them just yet either. He also didn't realize that we were all as connected as we were now. I felt protective of that.

Once we were back in the penthouse, the guys were eager to discuss what really happened. As soon as we walked in, Sephie pulled Stephen to her and hugged him. He held onto her so tightly that I was a little worried she'd be able to breathe. She stayed there, helping him calm his storms.

When he finally loosened his grip on her, she looked at all the guys. "I know what you all did tonight. It worked," she said, her sweet smile on her face as she looked at each of them.

"We weren't sure if it would work or not, but we figured you'd need help. You've felt different the last couple of days. Like you were struggling to contain it all," Misha said.

"You guys can feel the difference in my anger now too?" she asked.

Misha nodded his head emphatically. "Yeah, this one was way different. Not like you at all. We even asked Boss if you were okay because we were scared of asking you," he said. He looked a little embarrassed at the admission.

"Oh, my adorable Russian guardian, it's never directed at you," she said, walking to him.

"I know it's not, but I also didn't want to make you talk about something you didn't want to," he said, as he slung his arm over her shoulders.

She looked to Ivan. "You saw something different about one of them, didn't you?" she asked.

"Uh, yeah. Not human different. It was just as clear as Battista's associate. Did you see it this time, princess?" Ivan asked.

"No. I think the only reason I saw it last time is because you were touching me. I think I need to be touching you in order to borrow it," she said. "I did, however, look in all their heads. Totally regret that as now I won't be able to forget what I saw."

"Did you look after you broke them?" Andrei asked.

"No? What do you mean?"

"When they went frozen in place. You literally broke their minds. I don't know how, but you figured out a way to give them everything you got from Stephen, plus some. They couldn't handle it. The youngest one, especially. She might not recover. The middle one is questionable on recovery," Andrei

said.

"The oldest sister changed after you called her out. I saw it when she grabbed the other two to leave," Ivan said. "She did a good job of hiding it when I first saw her, but it was also clear on her when they went to leave that her demon is running the show."

"You didn't break her mind the same way you did the other two, but she was just as disturbed when she left," Andrei said. He looked slightly nervous. as he looked from Sephie to Stephen. He quietly added, "she was replaying scenes from childhood when she left, only Sephie managed to make her feel what Stephen felt."

"You're sure? It really worked?" Sephie asked, completely surprised.

Andrei nodded. "She might've looked like she was holding it together on the outside, but she was a hot mess in her head. She's stronger than the other two. I think that's the only reason she didn't break,"

Stephen calmly looked at Sephie. "This is literally everything I've dreamed of happening. How did you know?"

Sephie shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. I'm not completely convinced I did anything yet. It was different when you let me see in your head. I don't usually feel what other people feel when I look in their heads like that. Like, I'm looking for hard data, not emotions. But with you, I felt everything. I still don't know how I didn't break down from it," she said.

"Because I asked you to hold it for me and give it to them," Stephen said.

"You did?"

He nodded his head. "You were the only one that would've been able to do it. That's why I showed you everything. That's also why you likely missed the part about me asking you to hold it until you saw them. It's a lot. I'm kind of a je rk for doing it," Stephen said.

Sephie laughed. "You're not a je rk for unlocking a new level on me, Yoden. I didn't know I'd be able to do that. I don't know how you did, but I'm glad for it. And you feel better because of it, too. I can see it. You're lighter now. You've been carrying that around, by yourself, for too long. They're the ones that need to be burdened with that. Not you."

Misha got his faraway look in his eye for a few moments. He grinned. "They're gonna be carrying it around for a very long time."

"It's also a testament to how incredibly strong you are, Stephen," she said, walking back to him. With her arm around his waist, she added, "you've been carrying all of that by yourself for your entire life and it's made you stronger. They had it for 30 seconds and it broke them. Don't forget that."

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Adrik

Sephie was right. Stephen did look lighter. He was always the quiet one. His brain never shu t off though. He was constantly analyzing everything and everyone around him. We finally saw him relax. Really, truly relax. He wasn't on guard. He wasn't waiting for something to happen. He was just present. And happy.

Vitaliy had remained at the restaurant with Battista while we left. When he got back to the penthouse, we were all still discussing what had happened, but the conversation was turning more light-hearted. The guys were telling Sephie how effective her demon eyes were to the normal person.

"I'm pretty impressed they didn't pi ss themselves, spider monkey. Your eyes were as black as I've ever seen them. And you just sprung it on them. Your eyes were normal, then you looked down as you stood up and holy shi t, they were black, Andrei said, laughing.

"Not gonna lie, I've kind of missed them," Ivan said.

Stephen snapped his fingers, pointing at Ivan. "Same."

Vitaliy walked in with Aleksei. We could tell he was eager to ask more questions. Mostly, he wanted to know how she had such control over her eyes.

"I kind of don't. I've been wearing contacts around you since I met you. My eyes have a mind of their own and change without me knowing sometimes. I got contacts so I wouldn't scare you," she said.

"Change to black on their own?" Vitaliy asked.

"No, the black is the one that I can control the most," she said. She closed her eyes briefly. When she opened them, they were just as black as they had been at the restaurant. I couldn't help but laugh at Vitaliy's shocked expression when he saw them. I walked to her, wrapping my arm around her waist.

"That's not even the scariest one, Vitaliy. But it is very effective," I said. She locked up at me and I watched the black fade into the background as the blue took over. I smiled at her, pointing back toward my father. She looked at him and I explained that blue meant she loved me. He stood up to get a closer look.

"Your eyes normally have that blue color, but where are the other two colors?" he asked.

"That's how it started. The brown took over the other two and turned dark. Then the other two colors started taking over for different emotions. The only one that's completely different is when she's scared," I said. "It's the only emotion she struggles to contain."

Vitaliy was clearly impressed. "Battista was completely in awe. He wouldn't shu t up after you left, honestly." He looked slightly amused, but also slightly perturbed. "He'll do anything you need him to do from now on. He just asks that you help him with your unique set of skills when he needs

them."

I could feel Sephie's slight bit of worry. "How often is he going to need them?"

Vitaliy chuckled. "He won't take advantage. He's a very capable businessman in his own right, but he occasionally runs into people he needs help with. That woman being one of them. He said he has more information on the mayor, as well. He would like to meet again tomorrow. Only at his house this

time."

"Why his house? Why not the zoo?" Sephie asked, trying to hide her smile.

Vitaliy laughed. "It's going to be a very interesting discussion, sladkaya. It's not meant for everyone to hear."

We arrived at Battista's house the following afternoon. We were all somewhat on edge, as we didn't know quite what i house instead of the restaurant, but Vitally assured us it would be fine. He still only brought Aleksel with him, just as he Stephen's sisters, which I found odd.

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before with

We were shown to a large study. The woman who showed us to the room informed us Battista had gotten a phone call right before we arrived. He was finishing up and would be in shortly, We were all quiet as we waited on him.

He walked in, obviously rushed, a few minutes later. "My apologies. Unexpected phone call, but it pertains to what I'm about to tell you, so I needed to take it," Battista said, getting right to business. He looked at me and Sephie, then to Vitaliy, who had a bit of an unreadable smirk on his face. "You still haven't said a word to them about any of it, have you?" Battista asked Vitaliy.

Vitaliy grunted. "No, I haven't. You explain it better anyway. You know more than I do."

I immediately felt Sephie stiffen, as well as saw each one of the guys sit up a little straighter. We did not like surprises.

Battista noticed the shift in mood in the room. He waved his hand flippantly in front of him. "No one is in danger. At least not yet. But this conversation might be difficult to believe," he said. He looked at me, as he started to explain. "You're aware your father has very powerful contacts around the world?" he asked. I nodded. He inhaled deeply, contemplating how to phrase what he was about to say. "They're more powerful than you might think. Some of them are fighting wars that normal people know nothing about. There are dark forces that are vying for the destruction of humanity. There's a small group of us that are fighting against that. We have a few people, with gifts like your father, who are helping, but I've never met so many gifted people in one place until Vitaliy brought you to me." He looked at all the guys. "I'm aware that you all have gifts as well, but I don't know specifics. I know she's trying to keep the focus on her to protect you all, but I saw the subtle signs that you're helping her."

"What do you want from us?" I asked. I didn't have a bad feeling about this, but I still pulled Sephie closer to me after hearing what Battista said.

"It's not what we want from you. It's more what we'd like to give you. We want to help. You don't realize how dangerous Ricardo De Luca is. Or the Colombian," he snapped his fingers, like he couldn't remember a name.

"Martin," Sephie said. Battista pointed to her, silently grateful for the assist. "They've both made deals with everlasting consequences, haven't they?" she asked.

Battista looked at her, wide-eyed. "You know?"

"Not everything. Just that those two are the keys to all of this that's going on."

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Sephie

Battista took a deep breath. “There are unseen forces in the world, influencing humanity. Think of it like a game, if you will. Your job, in each lifetime, is to figure out how best to defeat the evil forces that prey upon humans. Much like the young women last night. Again, I don’t know details, but I’m fairly certain they’re being controlled by outside forces.” He was looking at me as he was talking. I saw his eyes go wide, which likely meant my eyes. had turned dark. He put his hands up in front of him, like he was trying to calm me. “I’m in no way defending them or their actions. It’s only to illustrate my point. People sometimes unconsciously agree to accepting these unseen forces. They give them control because they’re too weak to do it themselves. Once you’ve accepted evil, it’s very difficult to get rid of, unless you’re a very special person. Those women were not, for the record.” He looked from me to the rest of the guys. “You gentlemen, and lady, however, are.”

“How do you know this?” Adrik asked.

“Because we’ve been waiting for you. The powerful people I’m connected to and your father is connected to…” he paused for a moment, trying to choose his words carefully. “We’re from very old family lines that have been keeping an eye on humanity for a very long time. We try to stay out of most of it, only stepping in when necessary. But we’re watching everything. We’ve known about Ricardo for years. He made his deal very early in his life. Martin did too, but he’s so much younger that his deal was only recently made.”

“What kind of deal?” Adrik asked. I could feel him starting to get uneasy about the subject. I grabbed his hand, my fingers playing lightly with his. “And what do everlasting consequences mean?”

Battista looked at me, a coy smile on his face. “I’d still like to know how you knew about that, but that’s a conversation for another time.” He took a breath, once again contemplating how to say what needed to be said. “Some people try to game the game, if you will. Rather than working to better themselves or learning the lessons they need to learn, and signed up to learn, for the record, they find demons that are willing to make deals. It sounds great to the person, but the consequences are, well, horrific.”

“Like selling your soul? Is that what you mean? I thought that was just a phrase people said,” Misha said.

“It is, but it’s also a real thing. Like I said, there are unseen forces at work in this world that most people know nothing about. The ones that do either realize the danger they pose, or are greedy and want to try and use them to their benefit. That never works out well,” Battista said.

Adrik chuckled, his hold on me tightening briefly, I didn’t need to search his eyes to know where his mind went. “Ricardo got a raw deal, then. If he was promised greatness, his demon oversold and underdelivered.”

Battista laughed. “You’re not wrong, but you’re also not considering exactly who you are, either.”

“And that is…?” Adrik asked.

“Not only the King of the Underworld in this city, but the world by the time you’re done,” Battista said.

I felt the goosebumps rise over my entire body. I glanced quickly at Misha, who was having the same reaction. I looked over at Adrik, who looked as surprised as I was, but there was also the familiar look that meant my eyes had done something new, as well.

Battista continued. “You’ve surrounded yourself with the people needed to make it happen. Every single player in this that has stayed loyal to you, will serve you in making this happen.”

“Um, that’s one person. Basically one person has stayed loyal to Boss,” Ivan said, sarcastically.

“Yes, but he’s an integral piece of the puzzle. Trino holds more power than you realize. The people in the entirety of South America love him for bringing peace. Just as the people of the city love you for bringing peace. He was smart when he rose to power. Get the people to back you, keep their favor, and you’ll forever remain in power,” Battista said.

Adrik was quiet for a few moments. “We’re still working on how to fix the chaos in the city. I don’t know the first thing about the rest of the world.” he said.

“You don’t need to. The rest of the world is watching you. Once you fix the city and fox Trino’s problem, they’ll come to you. There will always be

for the underworld and what goes on there. People need had just as much as they need good. What sets you and Trino apart, however, is that you

control the amount of bad. You have rules to what you’ll allow and what you won’t and your rules are always for the benefit of the people, not the

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other bosses.”

“What is Ricardo planning? Do you know?” I asked.

Battista sighed. “We’re not completely sure. We’re still working on gathering as much information on him as we can, but both he and Martin caught. the attention of very powerful demons. They’re old. They’re careful. They know this is their one chance at establishing any kind of power in this world. and they’re patient enough to not f**k that up.” I saw the surprise on his face once again that meant my eyes were likely dark.

“Don’t be worried. It happens when I get angry,” I said, flippantly. “Think of them like a warning system. As long as you’re not the cause of the anger, you have nothing to worry about.”

He smiled, but didn’t look away. “I have a feeling they’re more than just a warning system.”

“What do you mean?” Adrik asked. I could feel that he was feeling overly protective of me.

“When someone invites evil in, the evil takes over. It runs the show. The person’s soul is basically pushed to the background, if not ejected completely. Like I said before, it’s very difficult to rid yourself of evil once invited in. Most people are incapable and will gradually devolve into worse and worse humans. Again, like those young women. You, however, have flipped the tables, so to speak,” Battista said, a sly smile on his face.

“How so?” I asked.

“Everyone has some evil in them. You can’t have a purely good existence in this world. Just like you can’t have a purely bad one, either. There’s going to be both. In fact, there needs to be both. The issue becomes when the evil gets out of balance. That’s what they wait for. They wait for people to shift just enough to their evil side that they can find a way in. It happens in any manner of ways. Sometimes they whisper to you, trying to get you to do evil things, they try to get you hooked on drugs so you’ll be more suggestible. If you’re strong, then they try to break you to give you a reason to shift the scales in their favor. They want you angry. They want you hateful. If they can’t subtly do it, they give you a reason to hate the world. I’m guessing that every single one of you has been given plenty of reasons to hate the world, but you’ve chosen not to,” Battista said. Once again, I felt the goosebumps rise over my entire body. “With you, my dear, your eyes changing to black shows very clearly that your demons work for you. It’s virtually unheard of. I have no idea how you’ve managed to do it, but it’s not only a warning of your emotions, it’s a warning to other demons that

you own them.”

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Sephie

I heard Adrik's sharp inhale beside me as he listened to Battista's words. I glanced at Misha, who was also shaking off the goosebumps he felt. Ivan's sly grin caught my eye, as well, as I glanced around the room.

"I'm not entirely sure of the dynamics of the group, but I would be willing to bet that you're all connected somehow and that you all complement each other. You've been able to stay one step ahead of everything that's happening as it's happened. The fact that Trino is still alive is a testament to how powerful you all are. We didn't find out about Martin's deal until it was almost too late. We set in motion a plan to ensure Trino's safety, only to find you had already gotten to him. His men are loyal to Martin, as we now know you found out much earlier than we did. I'm not completely convinced we would've gotten to him in time," Battista said.

"She even made it so he could see his dying mother one last time," Vitaliy said Battista looked at me surprised.

"And clearly you know things we do not," Battista said.

"I didn't know his mother was dying until after I told him to leave, to be fair said.

"My point still stands," Battista said, crossing his arms across his chest. "Now, we have information about the mayor. You're going to need him on your side. His police commissioner is trying to frame him, but Henry is the one that's on the take, not the mayor. The people in the city like this mayor, as well. He needs something to ensure they'll love him. Why do I feel like you've already got just the thing to endear him further to the people?"

Adrik chuckled. "We're still holding the doctor that created brawn. I think his face is mostly healed now. I had to wait to turn him over until he was recognizable."

"We're all still impressed that you didn't kill him," Stephien said quietly. "That was a stressful night."

I felt Adrik's arm tighten around me. His other hand held mine a little tighter as well. I knew he was still working through me being taken. We all were, judging by the looks on everyone's faces as I scanned the room.

"You have to get to the mayor. The journalist you're working with, he's one of ours. He'll have the information you need on Henry by the end of thei week. We know you asked him to look at the mayor, but we helped him find the information on Henry. He must be exposed, at the hands of the mayor, and the doctor needs to be arrested publicly. Because Henry is connected to $al, we can connect him to Dr. Moretti as well. It will be a very neat package for the people. Your dealers have already spread the word on the street that you are responsible for stopping the brawn operation, as well as capturing the doctor. The people know more about what's going on than you might think, but they need a big win to stay loyal to this mayor," Battista said.

I was sitting on the end of the bed that evening, thinking about everything that had happened over the last couple of days. I felt Adrik's warm hand. on my face. "You should stay asleep in the morning, love. I can see it. You're exhausted again," he said, his thumb rubbing lightly against my cheek as I leaned into his hand. I was still lost in my thoughts as he pulled me up to follow him to bed. He watched my eyes, his usual mesmerized expression on his face. "You've had so much to think about that you haven't asked me what new thing your eyes did today," he said, crawling into bed and pulling me into his lap.

"They did something new?"

He nodded. "When we were at Battista's. You have a new color. Andrei's going to be so happy," he said.

"Shut up. They did not turn purple or orange," I said.

"It wasn't orange. And I wouldn't exactly call it purple either, but it wasn't your normal blue. Maybe violet, maybe indigo, but it was different," he said, pushing a curl back from my face. He was still very amused while watching me consider everything. "Your mind is going so fast right now. Take a breath, love," he said quietly.

I sighed, finally looking at him. "I can't help it. I can't get it to stop. Distract me?"

He put his hands on either side of my face, pulling me gently toward him. His lips softly brushed mine. "I thought you'd never ask," he said, smiling against my lips. I felt my body start to relax as he pressed his lips against mine, capturing my bottom lip in between both of his. His tongue lightly ran over my lip before plunging into my mouth. I felt his desire for me come on suddenly and strongly. His kiss was urgent. He was making sure i could think of nothing else but him and I loved him for it.

Once I fell asleep more from exhaustion than anything, I found myself not on the familiar path outside the familiar house, but in the room that Adrik and I stayed in at Vitaliy's house in Panama. I recognized it, but was confused as to why I would be there..

"Hello, sweet girl." I heard Lena's soothing voice behind me: Her blue eyes that were so strikingly similar to the ones I'd fallen in love with were smiling at me as I turned around to see her. "I promised not to scare the men again, so your father told me how to make this happen." She laughed softly. "I really did make them mad, but they were also so worried for you. I felt bad about that. There's also the matter of them all being able to feel you. I wasn't aware they were so connected to you or that I would send your emotions into turmoil when I came to you last time."

I smiled at her. "They really do worry over me for everything. I kind of love them for it, I'm not gonna lie."

"They all love you, Sephie. Even Vitaliy. He's so much more like he used to be when he's with you. He's a very sweet man. He just doesn't want anyone to know it. He's why I'm here. He's been talking to me when he's alone."

I smiled, thinking about Vitaliy finally being able to tell her all the things he's kept inside for so long. "You need me to give him a message, don't you?"

She nodded. "You told him I was resourceful and I am, but he doesn't always pay attention to signs, so I'm here. I'm not able to see him in his dreams yet, but I will be soon, if you help him. He's blocking me, because he doesn't believe it's possible. He's jealous that I came to you instead of him, but he doesn't realize I came to you because I can't get through to him. He has to be open to it for me to speak to him. He's not right now. And he's cranky about it on top of that, so it's nearly impossible for me to talk to him

"I just need to tell him to let you in? Can I tell him to stop being a cranky stubborn ba stard?" I said snickering..

She laughed. "I would love it if you did. I was with you when you went to the hotel the second time. I haven't heard him laugh so loudly as when you told him to tighten up and stop being a cheeseball since before Adrik was born It made my heart very happy, sweet girl. You're good for him. You're good for Adrik, too. I knew he was special, but you bring out his full potential. His men, too. You bring out their full potential. I saw what you did for Stephen. He's a special case. We've all been rooting for him for so long. It was very questionable whether he could be saved. I'm not sure you realize how close he was to giving in to the evil that he's been carrying around for so long."

1 felt a pain in my chest as I thought about everything Stephen has had to endure in life, but then I immediately felt my anger when I thought about. his sisters. She put her hand on my shoulder. "Sephie, I'm allowed to tell you this because you're still not sure you actually did it and we're under a bit. of a time crunch here. You took Stephen's pain and allowed him to transfer it to them. You took the evil he's been carrying around from his sisters. and what they did to him when he was a child and you helped him give it back to them. That's what broke them. The human mind can only withstand so much. Once the psyche is completely broken, they're useless to the evil forces inside them, but it also traps those demons in that body. It creates a sort of hell for both until the body dies. That's Stephen's gift. He knows how to break the person. He used you to deliver it because he doesn't know how yet."

"I knew he was always going to be the one to min df uck people, but that sounds extra horrific."

She had a sympathetic smile on her face. "It does sound horrific, but it's also the only way to save that person's soul. You're ultimately doing them a favor. Not in this lifetime, but in the next. If they continue to give in to evil, it will eventually consume them. The middle sister was close to that happening. That's when Ivan can see them when they're close to being corramed or have already been consumed. When that happens, the soul dies. There's no chance at another life after that. What you've done and what Stephen will eventually learn how to do is to give the soul another chance. Not in this body, but the demon will separate from the soul when you and he break their psyche and the soul will have a chance at coming back and trying again in a new life. So, it sounds horrific, but it's the only way to save the soul when the person isn't strong enough to get rid of the evil on their own. Not many people are. You're saving souls, Sephie. Stephen will too cince he learns how. Ivan is going to help. You three have known more. evil than most people and are best equipped to deal with it. The others will provide support for you in their own ways, as well."

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 402

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Sephle

I inhaled deeply, thinking about what she'd just told me. I sat down on the end of the bed. She sat down next to me, placing her hand on top of mine. "I know it's a lot, sweet girl, but you can handle it. You all can handle it. You're the strongest group of people we've ever seen. Just what you've all lived through while still holding onto the good inside you proves that. You're all meant for such great things."

"I know. I'm actually glad that you told me this. I think Stephen is still struggling with everything, but this will help him. It helps me too. I still think his sisters deserve everything that happens to them, but I've found myself feeling the slightest bit guilty over what happened. Battista made me wonder if maybe it wasn't their fault."

"Everyone has a choice, Sephie. Remember that. Every single person, no matter what happens to them, can choose good or they can choose evil. You can be influenced, of course, but it's still your choice. It's only your choice. They made their choices and now they must live with those consequences. As you've told at least two of the guys, Karma will use you to deliver justice. You didn't decide their sentences, but you delivered them, Sephie. And you saved their souls in the process. So that's enough of feeling guilty," she said. Her tone was very maternal, almost like she was chastising me.

"Dam mit. Scolded by a ghost," I said under my breath.

She laughed. "You're so much like your father. But you're also very stubborn. I need you to believe in yourself, sweet girl. They all need you to believe in yourself." She paused, looking at me like a mother would look at a daughter. She smiled sweetly at me, taking my hand, and inspecting my ring. "He is quite possessive of you and I think it's one of his best qualities. You're going to need to be patient with him. Your connection with him is going to get even deeper, but it's going to also get deeper with all of the guys. He might find he struggles with jealousy at first."

I looked down at my hand, smiling. "I kind of think he's adorable when he gets jealous. I don't want to make him jealous on purpose. He has nothing to worry about, but I find it very endearing when it happens."

"He does have to share your time with five other very attractive men. It's understandable, but you're also quite good at making sure he knows he has nothing to worry about." She brushed a curl back from my face, her sweet smile still on her face. "I do miss him. I know I talk about Vitaliy more than Adrik, but I miss Adrik just as much. He just doesn't need me as much. Especially now that he has you. You're so good for him."

"He's good for me, too. I can't live without him now that I have him," I said.

"You two are meant for great things. But for now, it's time for you to go back Adrik is trying to wake you up. I seem to have caught you when you're not decent as well, so he can't move you."

"Jesus, again?! How do I keep getting embarrassed in my own dreams??"

Her laugh was the last thing I heard as everything faded to black in front of me. I felt Adrik's hands on me, lightly running through my hair, over my back. I heard his voice softly urging me to wake up. I took a deep breath, picking my head up to rest my chin on his chest so I could see him.

His sweet smile was the first thing I saw when I opened my eyes. "Were you talking to your dad again? You were laughing," he said, his fingers lightly running down my face.

I shook my head no. "No, this time it was your mother. She still feels bad for how she came to me when we were in Panama, so she learned how to come to me in my dreams like my dad does. She had a message for Vitaliy and she gave me insight about Stephen."-

He raised his eyebrow, curious as to what information I now had. "What message for my father?"

I was actually surprised he asked about that first, but I grinned at him. "I get to tell him to stop being a cranky stubborn bas ta rd."

He laughed. "Please let me be there when you do."

"I would never deny you such a pleasure," I said.

"What insight about Stephen did she give you?" he asked. I explained everything she'd told me about Stephen's gift. As I talked, he moved so I could see the goosebumps on his areas and across his chest. I laughed quietly. "We've always said he was the best at knowing how to mind f u ck someone. We just didn't know the part about saving them. It's so much better once you know that part. I know we were all strangely okay with the possibility of him being a serial killer, but I adore the kinder, gentler vampire that he's become. I'm glad he gets to stay that way."

"Me too. You should tell him today. I can keep the others busy so you can have time with him."

"Can you spare Ivan, too? I think he's going to prove helpful for Stephen in this."

"Of course. I'll make sure the Wonder Twins don't get too jealous," he said. He rolled us both over so he was on top of me.

"This. This is why I love you so much," I said, pulling him down to me so I could press my lips to his.

He smiled against my lips. "All this time I thought it was my giant c ock."

"That is also why I love you so much," I said, laughing. I wrapped my arms and legs around him as we both laughed at our silliness. "You're my favorite. Tell the others," I said, in between laughs.

"You're my everything," he said, smiling down at me.

403

Sephle

While we were all in the gym that morning, Andrei was helping me in his normal patient way, even when I was cranky that I still didn't feel as strong as I did before Ivan and I were taken. I always tested his patience, but he never got frustrated with me. He really was such a good trainer.

"So, I need to steal Stephen again. I know what his gift is, but I think he needs convincing of it. I also need Ivan's help. I don't want you and Misha to get jealous that you two haven't gotten to babysit for a few days."

He laughed. "We always prefer hanging out with you, but I know Stephen has reeded you. We've all seen the change in him since he saw his sisters. It's been good for him. I also saw what he had to endure as a kid. It's a lot. I know he needs you. And I think you're right. I think Ivan can help. They've both seen the face of evil."

"You, however, are capable of seeing the good in people. That's the glow you see. You're seeing auras, Bubba."

"How do you know?"

"I knew what you were seeing when you first told me, but my dad confirmed it. You and Ivan are kind of opposites. He can see evil, but you can see good. I think it's why you only see it sometimes on Ivan, me, and Adrik. We're all both. The acupuncturist is only good, so you see it on her all the time."

"Stephen has it now, too. After you broke his sisters. I noticed it the next day. It's not as bright as you three, but it's there."

I smiled. "I need to tell Stephen first, but I'll give you a sneak peak at what he can do if you promise not to tell."

He readily agreed, looking at my thoughts. I replayed part of the conversation had with Lena for him. "You can talk to Boss's mom now too?" he asked, surprised.

"She had a message for Vitaliy. She felt bad for the way she came to me last time, because it worried you guys so much. She learned how to come to me the same way my dad does."

He continued to look, taking in everything she'd told me about Stephen. "Who. That's heavy. But bad as s."

I giggled. "I completely agree, Bubba."

Ivan and Stephen were with me in the penthouse later that afternoon, helping me make dinner. Andrei was helpful in distracting Misha and Viktor was on his normal master of schedule duties.

"Viktor is going to be so happy tonight, Seph," Stephen said, smiling.

"I know. I'm surprised he hasn't had a meltdown because it's been so long since I cooked. I feel bad about that. I'm going to have to make him cookies again to make sure he doesn't hate me," I said.

"He could never hate you, princess. But he does love you a little less when you don't cook," Ivan said, laughing.

"It's funny 'cause it's true," I said.

We laughed and talked, but eventually the conversation came back around to Stephen's sisters and everything that had happened.

"Have you heard anything from your parents?" Ivan asked, curious.

Stephen couldn't hide his grin. "My mom called me. Apparently, they're still mostly catatonic. She wanted to know what happened. She said my oldest sister wouldn't talk about it. in fact, she said my oldest sister is barely talking at all. She went between being worried about them to angry at me."

"Did she ask how you were at all?" I asked. I could feel my anger coming to the surface, once again feeling protective of Stephen.

He chuckled. "Don't be mad, Seph." He no sooner said it than his eyes went wide as he looked at me.

Ivan caught on immediately to what just happened. "You felt her anger, didn't you?"

Stephen nodded. "That was so weird."

I laughed. "Welcome to the club, Yoden." I walked to him, sliding my arms arbind his waist. He hugged me tightly, his vampiric vice-grip quickly becoming one of my favorite things about him.

"Sh it's about to get so much weirder for you," Ivan said, laughing.

"I can actually help with that," I said. Stephen loosened his hold on me, looking down at me.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Have you figured out the details of what happened to your sisters yet? It explins your gift," I asked him.

He thought for a moment. "I showed you my memories, asking you to give it back to them. You did the heavy lifting. I just let you peak into my head finally," he said. He looked almost confused as he talked.

I couldn't help but smile at him. This was why Lena told me. He was still in complete denial of what happened. "You're not wrong, Yoden, but you played a much bigger role than you think you did."

"I don't understand," he said.

Ivan, who was really very quick to catch on, suddenly got it. "He's the one that broke them. He just needed you to make it happen the first time."

I grinned at Ivan, then looked back at Stephen as he fully comprehended what Ivan had just said. "That's your gift, Stephen. You know how to completely break people. You'll be able to do it without me at some point, but Ivan is right, you just used me to make it happen. Bonus points, too, because I didn't need to touch you in order to borrow your gift."

Stephen looked worried. "But I don't see how this is a good thing. I might be a serial killer after all."

"Oh, honey, no." I wrapped my arms back around his waist. "Let me explain before you start beating yourself up." I went through the details of everything Lena had told me in my dream. Ivan looked impressed. Stephen still looked worried. "It does sound horrific, but you're thinking on too small of a scale, Stephen. You're saving their souls. I'm still undecided if your sisters deserved another chance in the next lifetime, but ultimately that's what you gave them. When someone gives in to the evil, to their demon it eventually consumes them. That's when Ivan is able to see them. He can see when they're totally consumed or right before they're totally consumist. When that happens, the soul will eventually die. There are no more chances then. The demon won. While they're still broken in this lifetime, you kept the soul alive. The soul gets another chance to make it right in the next lifetime. Although it's going to take quite a number of lifetimes for your sisters to clear their Karma, you gave them the chance to do that. Without you, their souls would've been consumed completely and would've entually died."

"I saw it on your middle sister right away. Your older sister, too, when they went to leave. Hers was hiding when I first saw her, but Sephie brought it out," Ivan said.

In his normal quiet way, he contemplated everything we'd just said. "I never thought I'd be relieved to know that I didn't completely destroy them, but I am. I've dreamed about killing them in so many different ways it's alarming

You never gave in to the evil you've been carrying all these years. I haven't told you guys yet, but Andrei can see auras. Much like Ivan can see the evil in people, Bubba sees the good. He can see yours now, Stephen. He said it showed up the day after you saw your sisters." Stephen still looked skeptical, but he wasn't quite as worried. "We don't always understand why we do things, but our souls know. Your soul knew what needed to happen. and you listened to it. That's the important lesson here."

"They brought those consequences on themselves, Stephen. You didn't condemn them, but you did hand down their sentence," Ivan said.

Stephen was thoughtful for a few minutes, but he finally looked between me and Ivan. He had an uncharacteristic grin on his face. "Wait until Vlad

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Adrik

After the guys had gone back to their apartments after dinner, Aleksei retired to his room while Vitaliy remained in the kitchen for a few more minutes, talking to Sephie. Once it was just the three of us, she caught my eye grinning slightly. She then looked at Vitaliy. “Have you been talking to
7 Lena?” she asked innocently enough.

He still looked at her skeptically, but he nodded. “You said she’s resourceful and she can get messages to me but so far, I’ve heard nothing. I’m not sure it’s working the way you thought it would.”

She couldn’t hide her smile. “That’s because you’re being a cranky stubborn ba stard about it,” she said matter-of-factly.

He looked at her, surprise evident on his face. “Explain,” he said, squinting his eyes at her, like he wanted to be mad at her, but was physically incapable of doing so. He looked almost mad, but his lips were turned slightly upward like he was fighting the smile that was threatening to show
itself.

“You’re jealous that she came to me and not to you, but she only did so because she can’t get through to you. She’s been trying, but you don’t believe it’s possible. If you don’t believe it’s possible, then it’s not possible. She also sad she’s been leaving you clues, but you’re not paying attention to those either, so she finally came back to me to ask for help. If you would get over yourself and be open to seeing her again, you could talk to her all night every night, but you’re too busy being cranky and stubborn. So cut that sh
it out,” she said, firmly.

Surprisingly, he looked at me. “Part of me wants to tell you to control your woman. The other part of me appreciates her waiting until no one else was around to tell me this,” he said, a sly smile across his face.

I laughed loudly. “Like I’d be able to control her if I wanted to. Which I do not for the record,” I said, unable to hide my smile as she grinned at me.

He simply laughed, shaking his head as he got up to walk to his room for the right. She looked at me, still grinning. “He’s going to be so surprised when it works and he figures out I’m right.”

“I think he’s still getting used to having someone who isn’t afraid of him more than anything. It still surprises him,” I said, pulling her with me to the bedroom. “How did it go with Stephen?” I asked once we were alone.

“I think it went well. It took him longer to believe everything than the others, but his gift isn’t as immediately obvious. He did feel my anger today for the first time. That kind of freaked him out,” she said, trying not to laugh. “It was barely registering for me, but he felt it right away. Ivan caught on immediately to what happened. That guy. He’s so observant. He figured out Stephen’s gift before Stephen did. I’m always impressed with how well you and Ivan handle everything weird that happens. You two are always the best with everything. It helps me, if I’m being honest, so please never stop.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. I also think you help us more than you realize. I never really thought about it until you let Vitaliy touch you after you guys searched for Henry. He was shocked that we were able to feel your anger and not be consumed by it. It hit me that you also share your control with us when we feel your emotions. I think it’s similar with me and Ivan when it comes to everything weird that’s been happening. You share your capacity for taking it all in stride with both of us. Out of all of them, Ivan seems to have the strongest connection with you next to me. I think he gets extra perks because of that.”

“Your mother told me that the connections with all of you are about to get much deeper.” She stopped me from buttoning up my shirt that I had just put on her as we were talking. She grabbed both of my hands, looking me in the eyes. Her eyes were swirling. We still weren’t entirely sure what it meant when they couldn’t pick a color to stick to, but I loved watching it happen. It was like staring into the universe every single time I was able to witness it. “She said you’re going to struggle with being jealous at first when the connections with the guys deepen. You’re so good at sharing me with all of them. I want to make sure I always honor that. I want you to tell me when you feel like you need more time. I don’t ever want you to feel jealous, even though I think it’s adorable when you do.”

I smiled at her, still hypnotized by her eyes. “I know they need you, too. You’re very good at making sure I don’t have a reason to feel jealous, but I promise I will tell you if I start feeling that way. I try to remind myself that there’s only one of you. The odds are not in your favor. You have way more responsibility trying to take care of all of us than we do trying to take care of one of you.” She continued to button up my shirt, her eyes still swirling, with her heart-stopping smile across her face. “I’m beginning to think that your eyes swirling mean something specific, but I can’t figure out what that is. You don’t feel like you’re in complete turmoil right now. You feel happy, but your eyes can’t pick a color. I’m not complaining. I love it. It might be my second favorite thing they do.”

“What’s the first?” she asked, clubbing into bed.

“When they turn blue.” As soon as I spoke the words out loud, I was hit with her warmth that meant she loved me. I looked in her eyes after lying down so she could lie across my chest and they were the deepest depth of the ocean blue. I sighed, feeling completely spellbound in her eyes. “I’ll never get tired of that.”

“Please don’t,” she said as she laid across my chest, her warmth still spreading through my body. I held her close as I listened to her fall asleep, thinking about how words were no longer adequate to describe the love I have for her.

Chanter Commente

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Adrik

I woke up later than usual the next morning. I could hear that everyone was in the kitchen already. I ran my hand through Sephie's hair and she didn't. move. She must need a late day again. There's been a lot happening. It zaps her more than everyone else. I could see it when she broke Stephen's sisters, but she fought it for a few days again. Looks like she lost her fight this morning.

I watched her sleep for longer than I normally would have. I really wanted to stay asleep with her this morning, but I had an early meeting that I needed to be at. It did
not make me happy to do so, but I carefully moved her so I could get out of bed. She curled up under the covers, still sound asleep.

The shaking started as I was getting ready. I hurried, picking her up with me as I left the bedroom. The guys all knew what was happening as soon as they saw me carrying her. They immediately began arguing over who got to stay with her this time. Watching them argue with each other while trying to remain quiet enough to not wake her up was comical. Surprisingly, Ivan wor out this time.

"If I could feel what it's like to be hit by a truck, I'm fairly sure that's what I feel like now," he said, as he positioned himself on the couch so I could lay her on him.

"I'm surprised it's taken you this long to feel that way. You seemed to be immune from getting zapped any time anything new happened. Did something else happen that we don't know about yet?" I asked.

"I'm seeing everyone's demons now. It started after Stephen's sisters," he said quietly.
thought you could only see them when they started to consume the person?"

"I did too. It's hard to explain, but I saw them take over the person. Now I can see them waiting to be let in, if you will, Like they're riding around on people's shoulders sometimes. If it wasn't so disturbing, it might be funny. They're like pets on some people," he said.

"That's a new level, for sure. But it seems very useful. Stephen was right. He needs to turn you into a vampire so you have time to save the whole world."

He laughed quietly as he finished tucking in the blanket around Sephie. Since Ivan wasn't quite as warm as Andrei, we used an extra blanket to keep her from getting cold. She snuggled in next to him, still sound asleep, hugging his arm as she continued her dreams. I looked from her to him. "I know you're going to, but make sure you tell her that when you guys wake up. She's had conversations we don't know about lately. She'll likely have insight, We'll talk about it more tonight, too," I said.

He nodded as he yawned, laying his head down so he could fall back asleep for the morning.

We finished breakfast as quietly as we could, then left the penthouse. Vitaliy followed me to my office, wanting a few minutes alone. "She was right, you know," he said, once it was just the two of us.

I laughed. "She's right about literally everything. You're going to need to specify."

"I didn't believe it could happen so it wasn't happening. After she chastised me last night, I tried to believe it could happen and it did. I saw your mother last night."

He had a look on his face that I'd never seen my father have. He was still in his memories as he was standing in front of me, but he looked more at peace than I'd ever seen him. I stayed silent for a few moments, not wanting to break him out of his thoughts. Finally, he remembered he was in my office and looked at me, almost embarrassed. I couldn't help but smirk at him.

"I had someone tell me when I first met Sephie that she will show you the best parts of yourself if you let her. That statement was completely correct, but when she loves you, those best parts become better than you ever thought possible. You just have to let her love you. She does the rest."

Vitaliy stood silent in my office, contemplating what I'd just said. "I'm very proud of the man you've become," he said. With that, he turned and left my office, leaving me stunned.

My meetings felt like they were dragging on the entire day. I couldn't get my mind off of everything happening with Sephie and the rest of us. I could

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feel what she was trying to do to Stephen's sisters. I fully supported it. I got just a glimpse of the pain that Stephen had been carrying around his entire life because of them. I wanted to see their destruction as much as Sephie did. If she hadn't been successful in breaking them, I would've offered to have them killed before they left the city.

When it comes to those five men, I would do anything. My life was in their hands every single day. I trusted them. I loved them like brothers. I would make sure they were always protected.

I found myself thinking about Viktor more than usual. He was the last one to realize his gift and it seemed like it wasn't going to happen anytime. soon. Sephie was right. He really did love his job and I'd noticed he would send one of the other guys to stay with her, rather than taking the opportunity himself. Not because he didn't love her. He very much did. But he loved his duties too. I think he loved the distraction of his duties more than anything. Sephie had a habit of finding the dark parts of you that needed light shone on them. Viktor was avoiding that.

I could order him to spend time with her, but that felt rude. Viktor was a bit of a father figure to me, especially when I was younger and Vitaliy was still in charge. Viktor gave me the guidance I never got from Vitaliy, even though Viktor was only a couple years older than I was.

I sighed. If he wasn't ready, then he wasn't ready. I wasn't going to change that about him.

Before I knew it, it was late afternoon and I still hadn't seen Sephie or Ivan. The Wonder Twins were also starting to get worried. They came into the office during a break in my schedule. "Have you seen Ivan or Sephie yet?" Misha asked, the worry evident on his face.

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"No. I was just thinking about that. You guys haven't felt anything, have you?" I asked. They both shook their heads no. I looked at my watch. I still had half an hour before my next meeting. Viktor and Stephen walked into the office as I was contemplating going to check on her. "Let's go check. She doesn't usually sleep this long. Ivan either, but he finally got new level zapped, so maybe that's it."

We were all worried when we walked into the penthouse, but that worry was increased when we found Ivan and Sephie still on the couch. They'd been sleeping almost the entire day. That never happened. I could hear Sephie mumbling quietly, but her body was still. I knelt down in front of them, my hand on her cheek, trying to wake her. I heard him mumbling when I got closer.

I felt nothing out of the ordinary from her. She felt like she did when she was sleeping. I looked at Andrei. "Can you feel anything from her? She's mumbling. That usually is not a good sign. I don't feel anything from her, though."

"No, Boss. She feels like she does when she's sleeping," he said.

"Can you take a look in her head and see what's going on?"

His eyes glazed over as he looked in her head. After what felt like the longest moment of my life, he looked at me, now clearly present again. "They're- dreaming. The same dream, though. She's in a house, but she's with Ivan. They're with someone else, but that's all I could see before everything went
to black."

I very clearly heard Sephie say, "don't worry, my love. I'm fine. So is Squish." My eyes were on her when I heard her voice. Her mouth didn't move.

I looked at the guys. "Did any of you just hear that?" They all looked at me like I might've been crazy.

"Hear what?" they all asked.

"I just heard her tell me they were fine. Like she was standing next to me. Except she's not. She's asleep."

Stephen, in his normal serious way, said, "it was only a matter of time before she was able to communicate telepathically with you. You guys have been doing it silently for a while. Maybe she's learning how to talk to you now

Viktor's phone beeped, alerting him to my next meeting. He looked to me. "Tell them I'll be a few minutes late. She said she's fine, but I still don't like that she's not awake. I'm going to stay a few more minutes in case she wakes up."

I stayed, kneeling in front of her, my hand on her cool cheek, watching her sleep in Ivan's protective embrace. Neither of them looked troubled. They both looked like they were sharing a joke that the rest of us knew nothing about.

I finally heard her say, "miam, there's the warmth I love," as she opened her eyes, revealing the deepest depth of the ocean blue that I adored. Once again, her lips never moved. She reached up, placing her hand on top of mine. I'm fine. He's fine, too. I'm sorry I worried you. I forget time is

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different when talking to my dad." Ivan started to stir as well. She sat up, still fighting to wake up completely. "Your next meeting is waiting for you. He's irritated that you're late, for the record. Go. I'll come down after you're done with this meeting and fill you in. Especially since you're wondering how I knew that," she said, grinning at me.

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Sephte

I felt Adrik stir underneath me, but I couldn't bring myself to wake up. Normally, I wasn't aware of when he woke up when I needed to sleep longer. This time, however, I could hear his thoughts as he watched me sleep.

It was like his internal dialogue was now in my head. I heard him thinking. I heard him wishing he could stay with me.

I felt him pick me up, wrap a blanket around me, and carry me out of the bedroom with him. Before the guys made the decision on who was going to stay with me, I knew it was going to be Ivan. I knew he'd been zapped, but I didn't know why yet. I could feel his exhaustion. Wait, I can feel him without seeing him.

I heard him tell Adrik why he'd been extra tired. How he could see not just when a person's demon consumed them, but now when they were looking for ways in, too. That's gotta be slightly comical, in a twisted sort of way.

As everyone left for the day, I felt Ivan fall asleep behind me. His massive arms were holding onto me, keeping me safe while we slept. I found myself back in the darkness. Only this wasn't my darkness. It felt different. It sounded different. I could hear music. Piano music. I recognized the song. It was Ivan's song.

I felt him before I could see him. "Princess?" I turned to find Ivan, looking very confused as to why I was in his darkness.

"Squish," I said, smiling at him. "Did you leave your phone on before you went to sleep with me on the couch?"

"How do you know we're on the couch? You were sleeping?" He said the last statement like a question, as he was beginning to question what his eyes

53w.

"I was. I am. But somehow I'm still aware of everything going on around me knew it was you that was going to stay with me today. I could feel your exhaustion when Adrik walked out with me."

"This is new, isn't it?"

"Yes. Very much so, yes. I could also hear Adrik's thoughts before he got out of bed this morning. I kind of woke up when he woke up, but I didn't move. But normally I'm incapable of not reacting when he touches me, so I wasn't really fully awake. Just aware."

He looked at me thoughtfully, like he was trying to come up with an explanation. "You have been very aware of things happening that you can't see lately. Maybe this has to do with that?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I dunno. When were you gonna tell me you can see demons all the time now?" I asked, trying to fake outrage to make him

worry.

"I was gonna tell you, princess. I'm still getting used to it. Do you know how hard it is to keep a straight face when you see some little demon riding. around on someone's shoulder like it's their pet dragon? I'm trying my best to keep it together right now. You always amplify things, too. Maybe I was worried you were going to make me hear them too." He laughed as he said it. He just wanted to give me a hard time.

"Okay, you can make it up to me," I said, cutting my eyes over at him like I was irritated with him. He raised an eyebrow at me.

"At some point, once I get a handle on how exactly I borrow everyone's gifts, I'm gonna need to see this for myself," I said, grinning at him.

"Deal."

"Now answer my original question. Did you leave your phone playing?"

He shook his head no. "No, I've listened to the recordings of you playing so much that they started playing on their own now when I come here. I like it. Makes it nicer," he said. I couldn't help my smile. "The bigger question, I think, is why you're here, princess. Not that I mind, but this is definitely

new."

As soon as he asked the question, the scene in front of us changed. His darkness faded away to reveal the very familiar path, in front of the very

familiar house. I smiled at Ivan, taking his hand, and leading him to the house. "You're in for a treat, Squish."

We walked into the house, hearing the familiar song my dad was playing while he waited for us. Ivan looked down at me skeptically as we walked into the room where my dad was. As the song ended, he said, "I know this is a little strange, Ivan, but I needed to talk to both of you and this saved me some time. I've joined a new aerial acrobatics team and we have practice later. I'm on a time schedule," my dad said as he turned to face us.

I laughed as I went to hug him, leaving Ivan still somewhat stunned and slightly confused. I turned to look at Ivan and as soon as he saw me standing next to my dad, he figured it out. "You're Sephie's dad," he said. "You look like him, princess."

My dad looked down at me, raising an eyebrow as he studied my face. "I think her mother helped way more than I did on her looks, but I'll take the compliment anyway. I plan to tell everyone about this, in fact," he said, grinning at me.

"Clearly, I got my sense of humor from him, though," I said, laughing.

"It's one of my best traits," my dad said.

"Hers too," Ivan added.

"Why did you need to see both of us this time?" I asked.

"Well, now that things are happening a little faster and you guys are getting more information, I can finally tell you a little more. I'm here to offer a little clarity about everything. Granted, you've all had quite a bit to take in, but you're all handling it better than we ever could've expected," he said.

"I think it's because we have each other," I said, smiling at Ivan. He gave me a wink, his sly grin stretching across his face.

"You're not wrong there, peanut. You're all starting to realize how you each fit into this puzzle. That's why I'm here. Poor Stephen is still unsure about his gift, even with Lena's explanation. He's still fighting to believe he's good enough. You two will be very good for him in the next few weeks. Lena was right. We've all been worried about him for a while."

"Worried about him why?" Ivan asked.

"He almost gave in to his demon. We weren't sure he was going to be able to hold out long enough to discover his gift. You guys haven't seen his inner turmoil because he's so good at hiding everything. He's been struggling for a very long time. It's why his bloodlust is comparable to Adrik's. It's a release for him. A way to get rid of some of the evil he's been carrying around with him for so long."

"But Sephie gave all of that to his sister's right? Should we still be worried about him?" Ivan asked. I found his concern to be very touching.

"He's much better now, yes. He's just struggling to believe he can do it. Because his gift isn't as obvious as everyone else's, he still believes Sephie did most of it. It was him, from start to finish. You technically held onto his memories for him, but you were only a battery for him, much like you are for Misha. What you really did was help him package it all up very neatly so he could give it back to them. The guys all helped, as they can send power to you, but not Stephen yet. He knew, without knowing, that he needed you as a power source. The rest of it was his. He just doesn't know it yet."

"Does he need that kind of juice every time?" I asked.

My dad laughed. "No, peanut. Like Misha, he's going to learn to do it on his own, without you. You just offer clarity for them right now. You're the calming force they need to be able to concentrate. Just like Ivan and Adrik and that for you."

I glanced at Ivan, who looked surprised. "I actually just said this to Adrik last right. You two are always the best about taking new things in stride. It helps me do the same."

Tthink you're underestimating your role in it, princess. I think you share your ability to go with the flow with the two of us. I think we're just more connected than the others. At least for now," Ivan said.

"He's right, peanut. Ivan and Adrik are more connected to you than the others and will always remain so. Although your connection with all of them is only going to grow stronger. But those two are connected to you in ways that the others aren't."

Ivan snapped his fingers, pointing at me. "Called it."

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Sephie

My dad laughed at Ivan. He continued, “you’ll always have the deepest connection with Adrik. That’s how you two are able to communicate without words now. That’s going to continue to get stronger the more you practice. But you also have a deeper connection with Ivan than the rest of them. You’ve spent more lifetimes with Ivan than you have with the others. There’s a familiarity with him that you don’t have with the others. It’s what helped you see through his gruff exterior when you first met him. He might’ve made you nervous, but some part of him felt familiar to you. It’s the same for Adrik. He’s felt closer to Ivan faster than the others. Because you three have spent the most time together.”

Ivan chuckled. “I’ve never had a woman see through,me as quickly as she did.”

“It happens to be one of her many gifts, but it’s also because her soul recognized yours. You two have a special bond, made stronger over each lifetime you spend together.”

“You told me last time that my eyes are a warning system. Do you know why they swirl? Like they can’t pick a color to stick to?” I asked.

My dad chuckled. “They can’t pick a color because you can’t pick an emotion, peanut. You’ve been right all along that each color coincides with an emotion. The white is the most shocking because you struggle the most with your fear, but you’re slowly learning to get a handle on it, with help from all of them. The newest color is unique and a new way to confirm universal truths. It’s going to come in handy in certain situations. Battista was right about your demon eyes, too. Actually, Stephen was right to name them that to begin with. Your eyes go black because your demon is stepping forward. The difference between you and others, though, is that you control your deman, not the other way around. Essentially, you’ve forced your demon to use its powers for good, which is somewhat hilarious to think about. You garned the demon,” he said, looking down at me, like he would if he were bragging about my scholastic achievements.

“So she was being serious when she said the best way to defeat your demons was to make friends with them?” Ivan asked.

“She was serious. She didn’t know she was serious, to be fair, but she was seritus. Battista said he didn’t understand how it worked, because he’s never seen it happen. But Sephie isn’t the only one that can do it. Just like she’s not the only one that can walk between Heaven and Hell,” he said, looking at Ivan with one eyebrow raised.

I grinned at Ivan, knowing he was putting it together in his head. I looked at my dad, knowing he would understand my question.

“I was right about Adrik too, then?” He nodded his head. “You’re right about pretty much everything, peanut.”

“Not about Armando. He got past me,” I said.

“He was a special case. His demon was running the show, but it was also smart enough to step back when Armando was around you, which is why you missed it. It’s also what made Armando appear as mo ronic as he did. He wasn’t aware of things that happened when the demon was in control. That’s what you pick up on when watching people, when you get bad feelings about them. It’s their demons you’re detecting. But sometimes if a demon is savvy enough, like in the case of Armando, they can get past you. That’s also partly why he was so savage with you. Armando was scared of you, but his demon was equally as scared of you once he saw your black eyes. Now that you have Stephen, that fear is going to increase on any demon you encounter. Which is why Ivan’s gift evolved to be able to see them at any po not just when they consume the person. Andrei will help with that, too, since he’s the balance. He sees good, Ivan sees evil. You two will figure out whether a person is ruled by good or evil by looking at them, which will confirm what Adrik can learn by touching them. He won’t always be able to touch someone, so you two are backups to that.”

As he explained this to me, it suddenly hit me what needed to happen to Armando. I looked at my dad, who had an amused expression on his face. He pointed to Ivan. “Show him,” he said.

“Show him what?” I asked, confused.

“Your eyes.” Ivan stepped closer to see as my dad explained, “Adrik didn’t want to call them purple because he didn’t think she liked that, but as a man who really doesn’t care about the nuances of colors, purple seems accurate to me. It means it’s a universal truth.”

“Andrei is going to be so happy,” Ivan said..

“Shut up. That’s what Adrik said too,” I said, laughing.

“What were you thinking about, princess? What made that happen?” Ivan asked.

“Stephen needs to break Armando. You have to help me convince Adrik not to kill him.”

He scoffed. “That’s easier said than done, but I’ll help. I have to admit that I want him dead just as much as he does.”

“Maybe you’ll both get some consolation when I remind you that once broken, the soul and the demon are stuck together in the body until the body dies. Neither are in control. Both are in their own Hell for the duration. The soul will undergo its own torture, just as the demon will. It’s not pretty, but it’s not meant to be. It’s meant to be a lesson that the soul never forgets ever again. Armando’s soul will get a chance at clearing some of the awful karma it’s collected in this lifetime if Stephen breaks him. If Adrik kills him, the soul will never have to endure that lesson and will likely make the same mistakes over and over again. You’re giving his soul a second chance, yes, but you’re also saving future generations from repeating things done in this lifetime that should never be repeated.”

I very clearly heard Andrei’s voice in my head. I looked at Ivan, then to my dad to see if either one of them heard it as well. My dad smiled at me. “You heard him?” he asked.

“Heard who?” Ivan asked.

“Andrei,” I said. “I just heard his voice.”

“They’re worried about you because you’re both still sleeping. Adrik asked Andrei to look in your head to make sure you’re okay. You’re both mumbling in your sleep. Side effect of talking to both of you at the same time. You can tell Adrik you’re fine without leaving, peanut.”

“I can?”

He laughed, but nodded his head. “Concentrate on what you can feel from him then think about pushing your words to him, the same way you push your thoughts and emotions to him. He’ll hear you.”

“Oh, this is gonna freak him out,” I said, giggling. “Don’t worry, my love. I’m fine. So is Squish.” I waited to see if I could hear his answer. My dad watched, a small smile on his face. I couldn’t help but giggle again. “He doesn’t believe he just heard me. This is going to be fun.”

“Wait ’til you figure out you can do it with Ivan too,” my dad said, grinning at both of us. “Perks of your connection. You just haven’t figured it out yet. Consider it my early Christmas present.” Ivan’s eyes got wide as he looked to me, just as I looked at him.

“We’re going to be so much trouble,” I said under my breath.

My dad laughed. “You two should go now. I’ve kept you here almost the entire day. You’ll need to catch everyone else up to speed, as well. Ivan, Sephie has helped all of you realize your gifts, but Viktor is reluctant. He also knows that Sephie is helping everyone realize their gifts, so he’s avoiding her.”

“I knew it!” I said, slightly irritated about it.

My dad laughed. “He’s scared. Rightfully so, but he’s also ready. He just doesn think he is. You and Adrik can help him the same way Sephie has helped the rest of you. I’m not completely convinced she’s going to be able to help him realize his gift and I’m not just saying that because I bet on you and Adrik.” He looked to me, before he said, “but I do owe you a high five for getting Stephen in before the end of the month. You really saved me on that one.”

Ivan looked amused. “Clearly her sense of humor is not all she got from you, he said.

“Chip off the ol’ block, this one,” my dad said as he put his arm around my shoulders. He extended his hand to Ivan. “It feels weird to thank you for taking my job, but I know she’s in very capable hands with you. I’m still around, watching, but now I’m doing even less than I was before. But thank you, for always watching over her.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Ivan said.

My dad turned me to face him, wrapping his arms around me. “We’ll see each other again soon, peanut. Lena wanted me to tell you thank you. She finally got to talk to that cranky stubborn ba stard because of you,” he said, laughing.

“That makes me happy. He needed that. And thank you, Dad, for always being here to provide insight,” I said. I took a step back from him and everything faded to black. Ivan disappeared too and I knew I was back to my own darkness. I could feel Adrik’s hand on my cheek, making my entire body feel warm enough again. “Mhim there’s the warmth I love,” I thought before opening my eyes to see him kneeling in front of me, a look of concern on his face. I assured him I was fine, apologizing for not realizing the time. “Your next meeting is waiting for you. He’s irritated that you’re late, for the record. Go. I’ll come down after you’re done with this meeting and fill you in. Especially since you’re wondering how I knew that,” I said, grinning at him.

408

Sephle

I had enough time for a quick shower before Adrik was done with his meetings for the day. I was deep in thought during my shower, thinking about everything I'd learned, along with everything that had happened lately. As I turned the water off, I heard Adrik's voice, very clearly in my head. He was wondering what I was thinking about; he could feel my emotions going crazy

"Jesus, she's all over the place," he thought. Since I'd never seen it happen, golfout of the shower to see if my eyes were swirling. They were. Now I understand why he's so mesmerized by this. The colors of my eyes were never still, never doing the same thing twice.

I tried to take a breath. I didn't feel out of control, but Adrik was becoming on more sensitive to me lately, so clearly he was feeling everything I was feeling at the moment. Instead of continuing to stew over everything in my head, I decided to experiment on Ivan. He was still in the penthouse, along with the Wonder Twins and Stephen. I had no idea if it would work, but tried to ask him a question while I was still in the bedroom getting ready.

"Do you think we should tell the others that you have a stronger connection with me or do you think they'll be jealous?" I thought about asking Ivan the same way I got Adrik to hear my thoughts. I wasn't sure if it would work, but I heard his answer shortly after.

"I think we should wait on that, princess. I also think we should wait on telling them this is a thing that's happening now. I understand why Boss wanted to wait to tell everyone about your eyes. This is really fun."

"We are in so much trouble, Squish."

I walked down the hallway to the kitchen, laughing to myself about being able to talk to Ivan as well as Adrik. The guys were standing in the kitchen, waiting for me.

"You look better again, spider monkey," Andrei said. "You got zapped worse this time, I think. I don't know how you fight it. It sucks."

doesn't feel as bad as the first time when Adrik and I both got zapped.

"I think I'm getting used to it, so apparently it doesn't feel as bad as it looks or when it happened with Misha. Those two were the worst," I said, hugging his waist.

"The sh itty part is that it only happens to us once and it happens to her all the time," Misha said.

"It's not that sh itty, my adorable Russian guardian. It just makes me tired. It doesn't kick my as s. And if that's what it takes to help you guys, then I' gladly do it. Although, I have to say, you should all be jealous of Squish. It took him a really long time to get zapped. I didn't even help him on this one. He just did it. He's totally superhuman."

"You got a new level?" Stephen asked.

Ivan nodded. "After you broke your sisters, it started happening. It went from being able to only see a person's demon when they were completely consumed by it, or right before that happened, to now being able to see the denons all the time. Like I can see them riding around on people looking for ways to get in. It looks like some people have a pet demon riding around on their shoulder," he said, trying not to laugh at his explanation.

"How do you keep a straight face," Stephen asked, completely serious.

"It's so hard, man. So hard."

"We should go downstairs. Adrik's meeting just left. His last meeting had to reschedule, so he's free. We have much to discuss, gentlemen," I said, grabbing Misha's arm and walking toward the door.

Once we were on the elevator, Andrei asked, "you both were talking to your dad, weren't you?"

I nodded my head. "I heard you in my head, but you disappeared quickly. Not sure if it was my doing or my dad's doing. You saw us?" I asked.

*I could see the house and see you and Ivan standing inside talking to someone else, but I never saw him completely. I just figured it had to be him, since none of us could feel anything out of the ordinary from you. You felt like you normally do when you're happily sleeping." he said.

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"That method of talking to me is much easier on you guys than the way that Lena first came to me. She still feels had about that, for the record. She's still apologizing for it. She didn't realize we were all so connected or that it would send my emotions into turmoil."

As we walked into Adrik's office, he was already looking at the door, like he was waiting on me to walk through it at that exact moment. I smiled to myself, knowing it's because he was waiting on me. His expression softened iminediately when he saw me. He stood up from his desk, closing the distance between us quickly. "I've missed you so much," he thought as I felt his warm hands on my cheeks, pulling me closer to him. His lips pressed. against mine. I felt the pull in my chest, showing me just how much he missed me. It only took a second and he lost the tiny bit of control he had. His lips parted, his tongue demanding entry into my mouth. He devoured me with his kiss, his passion for me making my knees weak.

"You really did miss me."I thought as he stepped back from me, pulling me with him toward one of the couches. He raised his eyebrow, looking at me with a surprised look on his face, but he didn't say a word. "It's our newest trick I'll tell you about it later, but keep it quiet for now. This one is special to you and Ivan." He nodded discreetly as he sat down on the couch, pulling me into his lap.

"So, what valuable insight did your father have for us this time? And how did you both get to see him?" Adrik asked.

"I don't know about that one. You'll have to ask him, but he did say he was saving time by talking to both of us. He's a very busy man," I said, trying to sound very serious. It was very difficult to sound serious about aerial acrobatic training.

"Very busy," Ivan said, snickering.

I took a deep breath and started to explain everything he'd told me and Ivan leaving out the part where I could communicate with Ivan and Adrik telepathically. For now.

Before I told them about what needed to happen with Armando, I decided to show them how I came to that decision. "So, Bubba, you're about to be really happy. My eyes did decide on a new color recently."

Andrei looked excited. "Purple or orange?" he asked.

I thought about what I was sure needed to be done about Armando, then looked at Adrik first. It was obvious that they'd changed to their new color by his expression. I showed everyone else. They all jumped up to get a closer look.

"That's so weird, but so cool," Andrei said.

"What emotion does this one represent?" Stephen asked.

"I wouldn't say it's an emotion on this one. This one is confirmation of univeral truths. It first happened when Battista told Adrik he was the King of all the Underworlds."

Adrik caught on that I was leading up to something else, though. "That's not what you're thinking about now, though. You weren't worried when you thought about that. You're worried now."

Ivan said, "only because she's not sure how you're going to take what she's apcut to tell you. But for the record, I agree with her. Just let her explain it fully and I think you'll agree with her too."

I felt Adrik's arms tighten around me as he braced himself for what I was going to say. He really did hate surprises. "You can't kill Armando. Stephen needs to break him the same way he broke his sisters."

I immediately felt his anger levels rise to insane levels.

Chapter 409

409

Adrik

I’ve never wanted to kill someone as much as I’ve wanted to kill Armando and now she’s telling me I can’t? I usually agree with her on everything, but this is going to be the one time I definitely do not agree. He’s going to suffer. More than he already has. Then I’m going to watch the life drain from his face.

“I know you want to kill him. In fact, I love you more because you want to kill him. But let me explain.”I heard her voice in my head once again. I glanced around at the guys, who could tell something was happening, but they weren’t sure what. They all looked slightly on edge, like they were waiting to jump in. Sephie had turned to face me, her eyes were completely black, but she was smiling at me.

“Let her explain before you completely explode,” Ivan said. I looked to him, not completely understanding how he knew I was as angry as I was. “She had to get angry to get you to think. We can feel her response to you. If it went anyone else, I’d suggest we all leave, but my money’s on her, not gonna lie.”

1 glanced around the room. Stephen’s eyes were wide. “This is so weird,” he said. “How does she not kill everyone?” he asked almost in a half-whisper.

Sephie giggled, her eyes still focused on me. “Let me explain?” she asked. I nded once. I tried to calm down, but I still felt like I was ready to rip someone apart. She shifted again in my lap, so she was straddling me. I could bear her dirty thoughts as she did, which helped my anger subside, but only slightly. She placed her hands on my chest, saying, “I know you want to call him. I wanted to as well, but there’s a better way. If Stephen breaks him, he’ll spend the remainder of his life being tortured in the worst way possible. Worse than what you can do to him. Armando was a healthy man. He’s not that old. He still has a long life ahead of him. If Stephen breaks him he’s going to spend every single day for the rest of that long life in complete and utter torture. He’ll be locked inside that body with the demon, ither of them having control, and only having each other to torture. If you kill him, his soul comes back and he makes the same mistakes over and over again. Which means innocent people will die at his hands, whether directly or indirectly. Don’t think of it like saving his soul. Think of it like saying theirs. If Stephen breaks him, he’ll have to endure a very difficult lesson designed to make sure he makes better choices the next time around.

As she was talking, her eyes faded from black to the new purple. I felt my anger subside as I watched the colors change. This might be my favorite color transition.

“Um, Seph, I hate to be a Debbie Downer over here, but how do we know his demon is even still there?” Stephen asked.

“It is, but Ivan will be able to see it. If he can’t, then I just have to show it my eyes. That will bring it out. It’s scared of me too.”

“NO.” While my anger was starting to subside, it surged again at the thought of Sephie having to be in the same room as Armando. There’s absolutely no way I would let her see him ever again. I would figure out another way to find out that information. She had glanced at Stephen briefly, but looked back at me when she felt my anger rising again. She had an amused look on her face that quickly turned to wonderment. “Blink, love,” she thought, grinning at me. I didn’t have time to wonder what she meant before her lips crushed into mine, her desire overtaking everything else. She was quick with her kiss, but it was enough that my anger was back to a manageable level “I’ll tell you that one later, too.”

“Okay, so Ivan will be able to see it. Maybe mention me if you have to. Show it a picture, maybe. Whatever. It’s still there. It is, however, smarter than the average demon. It knew enough to step back whenever Armando was around me. That’s how he got past me. That’s also why we all think he’s a f ucking m oron. He’s not aware of anything that happens when the demon is in control,” Sephie said.

That makes everything make so much more sense.

Sephie pressed her lips to mine once more, her eyes changing to the deep blae that meant she loved me before turning back around to face everyone. else. She took both of my arms and wrapped them around her waist as she crossed her legs in between mine. She glanced at Stephen, who still looked skeptical and mostly worried. “Don’t worry, Yoden, I’ll help you. You can do it You did it three times already. You just don’t believe it was you. I was only your battery. Actually, we were all your battery. Same as when Misha uses me and Andrei. You just needed a power boost. The rest was you.”

He thought for a moment, then looked at her. “I guess if I have to have a test subject, he’s the best one. There’s really no way to f uck this one up.”

She laughed. “You’re not going to f uck it up at all, Yoden. You haven’t spent years studying how best to m in df uck someone for nothing.”

Once we were alone later, I asked her about everything we didn’t discuss in front of the guys. “How can I hear you in my head now?”

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She grinned at me. “Really, it was the next logical step, I think. It’s not like we haven’t been reading each other’s minds already. We just have sound now. Although, I am now painfully aware that I affect you when I’m not with you. I heard you say ‘Jesus, she’s all over the place earlier when I was in the shower, thinking about everything that’s happened lately. Yeah, so, sorry about that,” she said.

I chuckled. “Don’t be sorry. I like being able to feel you. That’s what worried me today. It’d been too long since I felt anything from you. Same for Andrei and Misha. They came to check on you at the same time I was beginning to worry about you.”

“We forget that time is different when I talk to my dad. I didn’t mean to worry you,” she said. “I think it took longer because Ivan was with me this. time, too.”

You said being able to talk to me was special to me and him. You can do it with him now too?”

She nodded. “Only you two. You were right when you said you and he have a stronger connection than the others. Your connections are going to remain that way. His won’t be quite as strong as yours, but it will be more then the other guys. I think the connection between you and Ivan will get stronger as well. We’ve spent the most time together over lifetimes. The connection gets stronger each time.”

“How do you do it?” I asked.

“Do what? Talk to you?” I nodded. “Same way I push my emotions and thoughts to you. Just concentrate on pushing the words to me instead.”

“Like so?” I thought. She grinned. “Like so,” she said, pressing her lips to mine.

“And you think Ivan and I will be able to do this as well?”

“Among other things,” she said, her smile stretching across her face. “I’m not the only one with demon eyes now.”

“Shut up.”

She laughed. “That’s why I told you to blink earlier before I kissed you. I saw yours change. My dad literally just told me about it today and it already happened. You’re like in the gifted program. You’re clearly an over-achiever,” she said.

“How?”

“So, Battista was right in that the black eyes are a warning to other demons that I own them, but he was missing part of it. He’s apparently never seen it happen before, but you can do it and Ivan can do it. Remember my dad told me we could all walk between Heaven and Hell?” she asked. I nodded. “The difference between us and everyone else is that we control our demons when they step forward. We’re forcing our demons to use their powers for good. It’s virtually unheard of, which is why Battista didn’t have all the details about it. The black eyes are a warning to other demons that we know all their secrets. My dad did warn me that now that we have Stephen, the fears going to increase tremendously once other demons see us. They apparently get aggressive when they’re afraid.”

“And this is something Ivan can do too?”

“Well, not yet, I don’t think. You figured it out before he did, even though he found out about it before you did. See? Over-achiever,” she said, grinning at me. “Although I’m not sure yet how you figured it out.”

“I’m not either. I was so angry at the thought of you seeing Armando again, thinking about ways to keep that from happening. If you needed to show him your black eyes, I thought there must be a way to make it happen with me so you would never have to see him again.”

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She chewed on her bottom lip as she thought about what to say next. “It’s not dissimilar to how it started with me. I was also insanely angry the first few times it happened with me. It took me a while to figure out how to control it, but it still sneaks up on me quite often,” she said.

4

Adrik

I felt Sephie stir next to me. I knew it was morning. I did not want it to be moming. I knew I didn’t have anything important until early afternoon, so I could stay in bed with her for once. I didn’t even open my eyes; I just pulled her closer to me, pulling her leg over mine. “I’m not getting up yet. You’re not allowed to leave yet, either, “I thought. I heard her quietly giggle as she snuggled in closer to me. She pressed her body completely against mine. I heard her sigh as she relaxed once more, falling back asleep.

It was sometime later when I woke up again. She was still asleep next to me, her body completely tangled with mine. I heard Ivan’s voice, but I heard it in Sephie’s head. This is weird.

“Princess, are you two okay? You never sleep this long, but nobody is brave enough to come check on you.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. I was thankful they weren’t going to come in to check, as I hugged Sephie’s naked body a little tighter. I concentrated on Ivan, trying to push my words to him the same way Sephie had shown me with her. “She’s fine, Ivan. It’s my fault. I didn’t want to wake up this morning.” I wasn’t sure it had worked, but I heard his reply a few moments later.

“You got new level zapped, Boss. Don’t think I didn’t see your eyes change last night.” I could tell he was laughing when he thought that.

“Right. Because being able to talk to you when you’re G od knows where is completely normal, too,” I thought. I could hear him laughing. “We’ll be out

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I pulled Sephie closer, running my hands through her hair. She made her cocing noises, snuggling into me even more. “I like it best when you sleep in with me. The guys try their best, but nobody keeps me warm like you do,” she said. She finally opened her eyes, revealing my favorite deep blue.

“It’s the thoughts you make me think. It warms me up. They don’t have the same thoughts. Because they know I would kill them for thinking about you the same way I think about you,” I said.

She laughed loudly. “Gross.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at her response. “Come, we should get up. The guys are worried. Ivan checked on you once already.”

“Ivan came in here?” she asked, surprised.

“No. I could hear him in your head. He was asking if you were okay. He said none of them were brave enough to come in here, which I appreciate.”

“You heard him in my head?”

I nodded. “I answered him, since you didn’t wake up. You were right. Apparently he and I can communicate with each other the same way you and I do. He also caught my eyes changing last night. He said I got new level zapped when I told him it was me that didn’t want to wake up this morning.”

“He’s right. I think you did. I’m not surprised he caught your eyes changing, either. He’s very quick to notice the newest weird things now,” she said. “Poor Viktor is going to be terrified once he learns you and Ivan can do it too.”

I sighed. “I don’t know what to do about Viktor. I think you’re right. I think he’s avoiding spending time with you.”

“He is. I’m not sure I’m going to be the one to help him. My dad said it needs to be you and Ivan. My dad keeps assuring me that Viktor isn’t scared of me, but he’s terrified of finding out what he can do. He knows I’m the one that’s helped everyone else unlock their gifts and he doesn’t want to know what his is yet.”

“How do we help him then? I don’t know the first thing about how you’ve helped everyone else. You just do it, it seems. How are we going to do that for him?” I asked, thinking of how Ivan and I could possibly get Viktor to realize his gift.

“That, my love, is the million-dollar question,” she said, climbing over me to get out of bed. “One that I do not have the answer to just yet.”

Viktor walked into my office that afternoon. “I heard from the journalist. He said he has the information we need. Do we still keep up the charade that Chen is the one he’s been talking to this whole time? Did Battista tell him wh he’s really been helping?”

I thought for a few moments. “I’ll call to confirm with Battista, but my first instinct is to keep up with the charade. Chen seems to enjoy it and I’d still like to keep us as anonymous as possible.”

Viktor chuckled. “Chen loves it. Who knew that kid would enjoy pretending to be somebody else so much? I’ll make the arrangements.”

Once he walked out of the office, Ivan walked in the office, closing the door behind him. “That looks serious,” I said, watching him close my office door.

“Eh, I’d rather not be overheard and I don’t know how I feel about it looking like we’re in here staring at each other without saying anything yet. We have to ease into this one,” he said, laughing as he sat down.

“What’s on your mind?”

“Sephie talked to you about Viktor?” he asked.

“Briefly, yes. When we woke up this morning. I had noticed that he’s been avoiding spending any time with her after she brought it up. He always sends somebody else. I think she might be starting to take it personally,” I said.

“She’s definitely taking it personally, but she’s also trying to not let it bother her. Her dad confirmed that he’s been avoiding her. She was not the least bit surprised. But her dad also said it might be up to the two of us to help him figure it out, Ivan said.

“That’s what Sephie told me this morning. The bigger question is how the f uck do we do that? She’s the one that’s done it for everyone else. Even she doesn’t know how she’s done it. She just does.”

Ivan was thoughtful for a few moments. “I think we should have a conversation with her. She’s inadvertently nailed everyone’s gifts before they’ve gotten them. I think she was the first one to say that Stephen could m in df uck someone. She nailed me being able to see demons. She also hyped Andrei up enough that he finally started to trust himself and trust what he was seeing. The only one she didn’t do much for was Misha, but his was already starting. She did, however, make d amn sure we’d always listen to it.”

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“Agreed. She gave you extra points when she found out you caught my eyes changing yesterday. She said you’re getting quite good at seeing the weird s hit when it first happens. I agree.”

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410

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"Get out of my office, as shole," I said, laughing with him.

411

Sephie

“What’s up, my girl?” Chen asked as he walked into Adrik’s office.

“Chen! My favorite French person!” I said, jumping up to give him a hug. Shar Chen had been helping us out for so long, the guys no longer got overprotective of me hugging him. Not gonna lie, I miss that. “Are you ready to just straight up lie to someone’s face yet again?” I asked, laughing. Chen had discovered that not only did he love being able to lie to someone’s face, but he was actually quite good at it.

“You know me so well. It’s disturbing how much I enjoy this,” he said, chuckling;. “Also, the three amigos say hi. Trino still wants to know if there’s a chance you’ll move to Colombia.”

“One has to admire his tenacity,” I said, rolling my eyes.

All the guys but Ivan got ready to go with Chen to meet the journalist. Ivan was staying behind with us at the building. Adrik and Ivan clearly had a plan, but neither had let me in on it yet, so I was waiting until everyone was gone to see what they’d cooked up.

I caught Andrei before they left. “Have you snooped in the journalist’s head before?” I asked.

He shook his head no, looking at me quizzically. “No, do you think I should?”

“I didn’t before today, no. Maybe I’m just being paranoid, but I feel like you should snoop today. Just to be sure, if nothing else,” I said.

“If you tell me to snoop, then I’ll snoop. There’s always a reason that something like this comes up for you. Let you know what I find out,” he said, his boyish grin on his face.

“Be careful,” I said, hugging his neck before they left.

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“Always.”

Once they left, I turned to Adrik and Ivan. “I know there’s a reason we stayed behind. Are you two going to fill me in on that reason? Or are you enjoying keeping me in the dark?”

“We wanted to have a conversation about Viktor and how best to help him. Without the chance of him finding out. We need your brain, princess,” Ivan said as he walked to one of the couches and sat down. I followed him, sitting next to him while Adrik finished up what he was working on at his desk.

I thought for a few minutes. “I’m not sure how to help Viktor. I’m not sure how I helped any of you, if I’m being honest. It just sort of happened.”

“I don’t think you’re giving yourself enough credit on that one. You were the 5st to call Stephen’s mindf ucking ability, you called my ability to see demons, and you hyped Andrei up enough so he started trusting what he was seeing. The only one you didn’t do much on was Misha. I know you’ve picked up on something with Viktor that hints at what his ability is,” Ivan sald

“We’re all somewhat opposites of each other, with the exception of Misha. You can see and feel when something is off, but I have to touch someone to get the same. Ivan sees evil, Andrei sees good. Now, Stephen can mi ndf uck someone and trap the demon. Viktor’s ability should complement that somehow, if we’re keeping to the same pattern,” Adrik said.

I was chewing on my lip, trying to think of what it could possibly be with Viktor. They were both quiet, waiting for me to make the connection that I wasn’t convinced was there.

“What about the nicknames you have for him? Or inside jokes with him?” Ivan asked.

“I don’t have as many for him as I do for everyone else. I spend the least amount of time with him. He’s always on master of schedule duty,” I said. “I call him Papa Bear because he silently goes around making sure we all have what we need and he’s kind of like the father figure of the group. He’s arguably the most mature of all of us,” I said, cutting my eyes at Ivan, unable to hide my grin.

Adrik, who had been quietly contemplating everything got up and moved to the couch. I leaned over on him, stretching one leg across Ivan’s lap as we

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all struggled to figure out this puzzle.

“So, master of schedule. I think you’ve called him the security master before as well. And he’s like a father figure,” Ivan said, rubbing his goatee.

“He’s also the one that’s most terrified of me, I think. Maybe that’s why it’s so difficult for me to get anything from him. He’s gotten quieter as things have gotten more weird. I used to get little things from him now and then that he needed to talk about, but since you all know I can read your minds, that’s stopped, now that I think about it. Like Stephen, I don’t think he likes the idea of me being in his head,” I said. “Does he have sisters?”

They both chuckled. “No sisters. Brothers. But he gets along well with them, Adrik said.

“Is he the oldest?” I asked.

“He is. He has two younger brothers. Both of them are much like Viktor. Both are still in the military, last I knew,” Adrik said.

“His youngest brother wants out. He’s trying to come here when his service is up in a few months. Viktor told him we could give him a job,” Ivan said.

“I’m not surprised. He’s such a helper,” I said. I grabbed one of Adrik’s hands se my hands could fidget as I thought about Viktor.

“Okay, what if Stephen breaks them, but Viktor somehow fixes them? That’s what he’s really good at. Squish, you said you can see demons riding around on people looking for ways in now, right?”

“Yeah, they’re looking for weaknesses is what it looks like. Or trying to make their own weaknesses,” he said.

“That’s what Viktor’s good at. He puts the systems in place to make sure everything runs smoothly and there are no outside threats. Between you and Bubba, you can see where the weaknesses are. Viktor somehow fixes that and it’s one less person Stephen has to break. Because while I think. Stephen’s gift is f u cking incredible, I can’t imagine he’s meant to just break half the world’s population and leave them in a waking coma for the rest of their lives. That would be weird. Stephen is the last resort. Viktor helps make sure Stephen isn’t needed very often,” I said.

As I was talking, Adrik showed me his arm, which was covered in goosebumps. had been looking down at my hands that were still playing with Adrik’s hand, but when I looked up at Ivan, he had a silly grin on his face. He pointed to Adrik. “Show him, too,” he said.

I looked back at Adrik, who smiled at me. “We knew you’d be able to figure it out,” he said, kissing my temple.

“They’re purple?” I asked, still somewhat confused as to what they were talking about. They both nodded.

“Still slightly weird, but much less alarming than the white, not gonna lie,” Ivan said.

“She went from black to purple the other day. That might be my favorite color transition so far. It was incredible,” Adrik said. I could feel the familiar pull in my chest that meant he was thinking about how much he loved me.

“You’re late to the party, Squish. When are you going to figure out you can strike even more fear into the hearts of regular people?” I asked.

He cut his eyes over at me, his sly grin creeping up one side of his mouth. “Since your dad told me it was possible and I saw Boss do it, I may have tried to make it happen when no one was around.”

“Shut up. Did it work?” I asked, completely curious to see if he could make his eyes go dark now too.

He closed his eyes briefly, opening them to reveal his much darker eyes. His eyes were normally golden brown, but they were much darker when he looked at me and Adrik.

“Squish, you’re barely angry right now, too. That’s impressive,” I said. “Did you have to get to insane levels the first time it happened?”

“I did. I kept trying to make it happen without going nuclear, but it just wasn’t happening. I wasn’t sure if you’d be able to feel it. I didn’t want you to come running downstairs, so I waited until I knew for sure you were asleep,” he said, grinning at me.

“You did it at the ungodly hour of 4 am, didn’t you?” I asked.

He laughed. “Yep. I know you’re dead to the world then. It worked. I figured it out and you were none the wiser,” he said.

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411

“Well-played.” I looked at both of them. “You’re both going to need contacts now to keep from scaring the entire world. It’s bad enough when people see it on me. You two have an added intimidation factor. People are going to nin from you.”

“I think that’s kind of the point, princess,” Ivan said.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 412

412

Sephie

“So, princess, how do you control yours so quickly? You can get your eyes to change from normal to black and back again in a second now, without getting ridiculously angry. What do you think about to make that happen?” an asked.

“Um, I don’t know that I’ve ever really thought about this before. I just kind of do it. But I learned very early in life to think of my anger like a living being, almost. Maybe what I think of as my anger is actually my demon? It’s much the same as when I’m sending stuff to you guys. I just concentrate on it and push it forward,” I said.

Ivan closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them this time, they were much darker than they were just a few moments ago. I couldn’t help but grin at him. “Clearly, that explanation worked,” I said. I turned to look at Alrik. “Have yours turned dark other than that one time when we were all in here?”

1

He nodded. “I was talking to Ivan the other day and they changed. Like him it now, I was barely angry when it happened.”

“You guys are learning much faster than I did. That’s impressive,” I said. Adrik closed his eyes for a moment, opening them to reveal his almost-black eyes. “Yours are getting darker much faster, too. How?”

“When you showed me how you control your anger, I started thinking about reine like a living thing too. Maybe we’re just giving acknowledgement to our little buddies in there?” He smiled, his eyes still dark.

“Are you asking me because you think I have the answer? Because that’s not a thing I have,” I said. “Has anybody else seen this yet?”

“Not that I know of,” Ivan said.

“I might’ve had it happen in one of my meetings. I noticed a look of surprise on someone’s face and blinked when I noticed my mind was wandering to Ricardo,” Adrik said. His eyes had returned to their normal blue as he laughed about scaring his business associate.

“All this time I’ve been worried it was me who was going to scare everyone off. Turns out it was you,” I said, laughing.

“Told you that you’re gonna need contacts too,” Ivan said.

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Once the guys came back with Chen, Andrei caught my eye. He tapped his temple and raised one eyebrow at me. I took a peak in his head, looking through what he’d seen when he looked into the journalist’s head. When I looked into people’s minds, I could see what they saw, so I got a chance to see the journalist how Andrei saw him. I clearly saw his aura around him, but also saw it was broken in a few places. Dark spots, like holes were visible. Andrei felt nothing bad from him as he talked to Chen. I couldn’t stop looking at the way Andrei saw him. It was fascinating.

It also gave me an idea on how to help Viktor. “Squish, can you call the acupuncturist? Bubba just gave me an idea about Viktor. Also, I was able to see what he could see when I just went fishing in his head, so I’m gonna need to do that to you the next time you see a little demon riding shotgun on somebody’s shoulder.” Ivan laughed loudly, which made me struggle not to laugh, because it looked like he wasn’t talking to anybody. “My bad,” I thought.

“What did you do to Ivan, solnishko?” Adrik thought. I caught his sexy smirk on his face as he pretended to listen to Viktor.

“I have an idea on how to help Viktor. I also said I wanted to see what it looks when a demon is riding shotgun on a person and now I know how,”I answered.

Adrik was much more in control. I could hear him laughing internally. When ooked at him, he looked like he was still listening to Viktor, who was going through the information the journalist had given Chen on the mayor a the police commissioner.

As everyone started to pay attention to Viktor, the mood turned more serious. Our suspicions were confirmed by the journalist. It was Henry, not the mayor, that was dirty. However, it appeared that he hadn’t been on the take as long as we thought. From what the journalist could find, Sal had only recently gotten to Henry. We still weren’t sure what he was doing with the information on Ricardo, but we could still get that information to the mayor, along with this new information on Henry, and get them both taken can of. Along with a win in the next election for the mayor.

!

“So how do we get to the mayor without Henry finding out?” Misha asked.

“I might actually be able to help with that,” Chen said. He looked somewhat nervous to interject.

“How?” Adrik asked.

“Well, since you were gracious enough to take me on as a contractor on your latest building project, word has gotten around. I have a crew starting at job at the mayor’s house next week. I’m meeting with him Monday morning before we get started. I can get information to and from him and no one will ever know.”

“F u ck ing sh it, Chen. You’ve been a criminal mastermind this entire time and you’re only just now telling us?” I said, trying not to laugh.

“I could say the same for you, my girl,” he said, laughing.

The guys started to discuss the logistics of getting information to and from the mayor through Chen. What that looked like, how it would work, and how he could get information to us. Once they agreed upon a plan, Chen said his goodbyes and left Adrik’s office, leaving the guys to discuss the latest information we’d received.

I was still frustrated with having to deal with yet another reversal of loyalty when it came to Henry. I was chewing on my bottom lip, staring off into space while I thought about how irritating it was to not be able to trust anyone. I suddenly noticed that everyone had stopped talking and they were all looking at me, with very amused expressions on their face.

“How many times do I have to tell you that spontaneous human combustion is a real thing, gazelle?” Misha asked.

“What? I’m not even that mad right now?” I said, somewhat confused.

“Your idea of “not that mad” and mine are clearly different,” Stephen said.

“Your eyes say differently,” Viktor said.

“That’s not fair. You know these things have a mind of their own now, right? I’m just slightly irritated,” I said.

Adrik walked to me, smirking. He wrapped his arms around my waist as he stood behind me and rested his chin on top of my head. “She’s not lying.” This is barely anything for her. You guys are just becoming really sensitive to being able to feel her now. You’ll soon get used to it. This is like a 1-2 on her scale. Once you feel her 10 a few more times, you’ll be able to differentiate,” he said. I could hear him smiling as he talked.

“I still don’t understand how you don’t kill everyone,” Stephen said quietly. “I beginning to wonder if Vlad learned his scorched Earth policy from you.”

413

Sephie

Ivan arranged for the acupuncturist to come to the penthouse. It had been a while since she'd worked on me. My lung was continually getting better, but I was still struggling with controlling my panic if I struggled to catch my breath. I was more interested, however, in asking her questions about Andrei's gift and how it could pertain to Viktor.

Once she and I were in the room alone, she said, "your connection with all of them is much stronger now. But there's one that's still resisting?"

I smiled at her. She always knew. "That's actually why you're here. He knows that I'm the one that's been helping people discover what their gifts are, so he's been avoiding me. He's also very careful what he thinks around me since he found out I can read his mind. He's been grieving the loss of his wife. I keep saying that's why he's resisting, but now I think he might just be scared."

She held her hand out for mine, gently pressing on the spot in between my thumb and forefinger. She closed her eyes, reading all the information she would need from me like she always did. She had a small smile on her lips when she opened her eyes again. "Your connection with Ivan is much deeper this time. You can communicate with him much like you communicate with your fiancé, no?"

I nodded. "We haven't told the others yet. We've almost been caught already because I can't help myself from saying st upid stuff that makes them laugh."

She laughed softly. "The others won't mind. They know there's a special bond with you three, even if they're not aware they know it. The one who is like you he's seen me for who I really am?"

don't think he saw your wings, but he sees auras. I have questions about that, actually. We think Viktor's gift has something to do with fixing people or healing people, since they all seem to be opposites of each other in some way. We just found out that Stephen breaks people, so it makes sense that Viktor would fix them. The only one that's truly different is Misha, who can see the future and the past," I said.

She started putting the needles where they needed to go as she thought about what I'd just said. She put her hand over my ribs. "You're still struggling to catch your breath sometimes?"

I nodded. "It also makes me have a panic attack when it happens, which makes it worse. I've never had to deal with that before so I don't know how to control it. They all feel it, too."

She looked at me, then looked at the door, then back to me. She said quietly, your ribs are still not completely healed either. It's a constant reminder of the pain you went through. It's hard to heal from something when you get to relief from it. I will fix it." She silently went to work, putting more needles over the area than usual. Once she was finished turning me into a pin cu shion, she said, "the one who is like you can he see the holes in people's auras?"

I nodded. "I've seen what he sees. It looks like dark spots."

–

"There are ways to heal one's aura, but none of them are quick fixes. All of them require the person to do deep work on themselves. While you might still be right about the last one's gift, I'm not certain how it would work, without him needing an extra boost from us," she said.

As soon as she said that, she noticed my eyes turning what I assumed were puple, as I had goosebumps rising over my entire body. Her eyes went wide, just as mine did. I suddenly remembered another detail about Viktor I had all but forgotten. "He's the only one other than my fiancé that can calm my shaking after it starts. He just did it one day, without a second thought."

She was quiet for a moment. "It's not unheard of, but it's rare. It means he has someone in Heaven helping him. He would need an angel's grace to make it happen, but he could do it."

"His wife," I said.

She shook her head no. "She's already reincarnated. It's his unborn child." She inhaled deeply, smiling at my confused look. "A soul can clear a tremendous amount of karma when they sign up for tragic ends. His wife was still pregnant when she was killed, which is one of the most tragic endings for a life not yet realized. People tend to mourn the unknown even me. That little soul cleared much of its karma and is now helping him in this lifetime. They'll be linked forever now, as well." She was quiet for a monjest, then added, "that soul has chosen not to come back, just so it can always help him." She looked at my eyes for a moment. "Your eyes say this is the truth."

1/3

We heard a knock on the door. "Spider monkey, I don't want to bother you, but are you okay? You're kind of all over the place right now. It's worrying me and Misha."

I laughed. "I'm good, Bubba. Thank you for checking, though."

The acupuncturist walked to the door, opening it far enough that she could stick her head out. "It's resetting her emotions when this happens. They're going to feel stronger as they recalibrate and her body goes back into alignment. I can show you, if you like?"

I giggled, knowing Andrei was terrified at the thought of getting tiny needles stuck in his skin.

"Uh, no. No, I'm good. I just wanted to make sure she was okay," he said, nervously.

"She's fine. She'll be done in a few minutes," she said. She had a wide smile across her face as she closed the door and turned back to me. She said quietly, so he couldn't overhear, "I might like messing with him more than Ivan, which is saying a lot."

I laughed. "You've been hanging around my father, haven't you?" She didn't answer, but her smile grew even wider on her face.

Adrik had come to the penthouse with Vitaliy and Aleksei while I was talking with the acupuncturist. As soon as we walked out of the spare room, his eyes landed on me. His wide, handsome smile stretched across his face. Before we got to them, I pointed to Vitaliy and said to the acupuncturist so only she could hear, "let that man shake your hand. You'll make his day if you do."

She gave me a knowing smile. She surprised me by walking right up to him, putting her hand on his shoulder, and whispering something in his ear. His eyes went wide, but his cheeks turned as red as my hair. Even his ears were red. He stammered for a reply, but she just smiled at him as she walked to Ivan to be escorted out.

We were all left trying not to laugh at Vitaliy's flustered state after she left.

"I might like her a little more each time she's here," Adrik thought. I finally couldn't contain my laughter any longer and a small giggle escaped. That was all it took for the rest of them, even Aleksei, to start laughing.

"No idea what she told you, old man, but it clearly made your day," I said, grinning at him.

He grumbled something under his breath, but he also laughed along with everyone else.

"Who was she?" Vitaliy asked, once everyone had gained control. I knew he wasn't interested in hearing about her acupuncture skills, but that's the route I took anyway.

"She does acupuncture. She's amazing," I said, grinning at him. He knew I knew more than I was saying, but he didn't push it further.

"Perhaps I should get this acupuncture. Your light is very bright right now, sladkaya. Come, let me feel," he said, extending his hand to me. I walked over and put my hand in his. "You will tell me more later," he whispered as he took my hand. I nodded my head, smiling at his softening expression. He looked from me to Adrik. "Everything feels stronger. That woman does this to you, too?" he asked.

"Not every time. She has in the past," Adrik said.

"You need it every time," Vitaliy said, frankly.

Adrik chuckled. "Noted."

"The old man has spoken!" I thought, making Adrik laugh a little harder.

414

Sephie

I asked that Stephen and Ivan stay behind while Viktor, Andrei, and Misha were gone Monday morning to make sure Chen was okay while he met with the mayor. No one suspected anything other than a contractor meeting with his client, but since Chen had been so instrumental in helping us, we all wanted to make sure he was okay. He was also delivering very sensitive information, so it was worth our while to make sure he was good and had backup, should it be needed.

"So, this must be important since I'm most responsible for Chen's bravery when lying to people's faces," Stephen said once the others were gone.

I laughed. "Technically, he's not lying to the mayor this time. I think he can live without you just this once," I said, sliding my arm around his shoulders as he sat at the kitchen island..

"You know something more about Viktor, don't you?" Ivan asked.

"I do. That's why I wanted to talk to both of you while I was sure he wasn't around. I think I have it figured out and also why he might be so resistant to it," I said. I walked back to Adrik, who was leaning against the counter. He opened his arm for me, sliding it around my waist as I stepped closer to him.

"The acupuncturist helped you, didn't she?" Stephen asked. I could tell he was putting as many pieces of the puzzle together as he could already.

"She did. We were starting to suspect what it might be, but she confirmed it. You realize that everyone complements each other somehow, right?" I asked Stephen.

He nodded his head. "It makes sense that Viktor would somehow be opposite either me or Misha and it doesn't make sense for him to be opposite of Misha. That's just a normal person who can't see the future or past. That's not helpful in the least," he said, grinning.

"You're so smart, Yoden. Viktor, we think, is opposite of you. While I think your gift is f u cking amazing and quite possibly the most bad a ss thing that any of us can do, I can't wrap my brain around you needing to do it very often. It doesn't make sense that your life's purpose is to just break half the world and leave them as a dribbling mess for someone else to care for. Much like your sn iper skills, I feel like your gift is highly specialized and only meant for a select few," I said.

"While you are capable of breaking a person, Viktor is capable of healing thern Adrik said.

"After I break them? Because I can tell you right now, that's going to make me go harder in the paint when it comes to breaking them. I can't help it. I'm competitive," Stephen said, his sly smile creeping across his face.

I laughed. "No, before you're needed. There are going to be those that Viktor can't do anything about. I'm sure there's a point where his services are useless and yours are needed. His gift should prevent people from getting to the point where you're needed as much."

"Andrei can see auras. He can also see where there's holes in the auras," Adrik said.

Ivan put it together in his head. "I can see when they have demons trying to get in through those holes. Viktor can help ensure that doesn't happen."

"You're needed, Stephen, when the demon has already gotten in and has taken over so completely that there is no other choice. You're the last chance that soul has at surviving," I said.

Ivan glanced at Stephen, who was looking down at the counter during this conversation. He nudged him, causing Stephen to look at him. Ivan pointed to me. "Her eyes," was all he said.

Stephen glanced over at me, an immediate look of wonderment on his face. "I thought the black was difficult to get used to, but the purple might be even stranger. Can you do red next? I feel like that will make Vlad feel more confortable once he makes it out of customs." When I laughed, they changed to green. Stephen hadn't seen them as they changed yet. "Whoa. I just saw that, but my brain is freaking out trying to convince me I didn't just see that."

Adrik turned me to face him, so he could see what color they were. "That's not even the best transition. When they go from black to one of the other colors, it's incredible."

1/2

"Speaking of, I think he needs to know about your eyes and Ivan's eyes. His presence is going to bring out the violence in any demon we meet, which will also bring ours forward. It's going to freak him out if he's not prepared," I thought. I was trying to talk to both Adrik and Ivan at the same time.

I wasn't sure it had worked, until I heard Ivan say to Stephen, "so, there's something else you should know about, since your presence is going to really irritate all demons from here on out."

I turned to look at Ivan, who had his eyes closed. I could feel his anger, just under the surface. When he opened his eyes, they were just as black as mine. I grinned as Stephen's jaw hit the floor.

"It's not just him, either," I heard Adrik say. I turned to look at his eyes, now also just as black as mine.

"I've never regretted not wearing adult diapers so much in my entire life as this moment here," Stephen said, completely shocked.

Both Adrik and Ivan closed their eyes, turning them back to normal. "Allow me to explain," I said, walking to Stephen. I slid my arm across his shoulders, as he sat in the kitchen. He wrapped one arm around my waist like he was holding on for dear life.

"Battista was correct when he said that my black eyes were a warning to other demons that I owned them, but he didn't know the full specifics of it. He also didn't know that Adrik and Ivan were the same as me in that respect. Remember when I told you the best way to defeat your demons was to make friends with them?" I asked, looking down at Stephen.

His eyes got wider. "You're working with your demons."

"Mostly correct. They work for us. It's virtually unheard of, which is why Battista couldn't fully explain it. When our eyes go black, it's our demons stepping forward, but we're still in complete control of them. While I can't say for sure it's happened to other, normal people, I've got memories of my uncle with black eyes when he would beat me. I just don't know if it was real or not. Also, the guy that attacked me on the sidewalk when I was out with Misha. I'm guessing that once someone gives in completely to their demon, their eyes are also capable of going black. They're just no longer in control. The demon is," I said.

"You needed to know we could do this before you see it happen on someone else. I have a feeling that seeing someone else's eyes turn black is going to bring our demons forward, whether we want them to or not. You need to know that we're in control when it happens," Adrik said.

"Not because we think you'll try to break us. Just so we didn't freak you out. We've been told that now that you know your gift, we're going to see increased aggression from the demons that are controlling people," Ivan said,

"They're going to know what I can do?" Stephen asked.

"We think so, but we're not sure yet. They're going to be scared of you, but if they all act the way Armando did, they're likely going to be aggressive,"

said.

7

Stephen was quiet for a moment. He sighed, then looked up at me, a very snill grin on his face. "Is it wrong that I'm looking forward to them being scared of me?"

"Not at all, Yoden," I said, laughing.

"It's about time you felt it from the other side," Ivan said.

Chapter 415

415

Nephe

“So, how does Viktor’s gift work? Does he know about it yet? Mephen asked

Adrik and I exchanged a glance. I looked to Ivan, then to Stephen. With a sight said, “he doesn’t know yet. We’re not totally sure of how it works, but I know why he’s been so resistant to it. It’s going to be tough for him to handle

“What do you mean? It seems like it would be a good thing, right?” Stephen 16ed, more confused than

“It is a go d thing. It’s going to be difficult for him once he learns how he’s able to do it. If his gift works the way I think it will, he needs to have help to make it happen as quickly as we will need it to happen,” I said.

“The same way I used your help and Misha uses you? Why would he have a joblem with that?” he asked.

“Not the same way. I can’t help him with what he’s going to do. He needs eve more of a power boost than I can give him, if you will. He needs to have angelic help.

Ivan was starting to put the pieces together in his head. “His wife,” he said.

I smiled at Ivan. “That’s exactly what I said, but it’s not her. She’s already started her next life.” I paused to see if Ivan would figure it out, but it was Stephen who did.

“His child,” Stephen said.

“And I thought your gift was heavy,” Ivan said looking at Stephen.

“No sh it, man. Mine was a breeze next to this,” he said.

“So how does that work? Did his child die on purpose to make this happen? Ian asked..

“I don’t think that’s necessarily the case. Apparently, a soul can clear a tremendous amount of karma by signing up to die either tragically or before they’re born. His unborn child is now helping him as a way of thanking him for helping to clear the karma,” I said. I looked to Ivan and Adrik. “I have, no idea how you two are going to tell him about this. Or if he’ll even believe you when you do.”

“You’re not going to tell him, Seph?” Stephen asked.

“He knows I’m the one that’s helping everyone figure out their gifts. He’s been avoiding me and he’s careful about his thoughts around me, as well. Much like you, he does not appreciate me in his head,” I said. “I also think he’s the most freaked out about my eyes. He’s going to sh it himself once he sees it’s not just me anymore.”

We were all quiet for a few moments, trying to figure out a way to help Viktor. We all came up empty for the moment.

“I’ve got nothing right now,” Ivan said. He looked at his watch. “They should be back soon, though, so we should probably change the subject anyway.”

“Oh, they’re here. They’ll be walking in right about…now,” I said as we all heard the penthouse door open.

“Okay, you’re going to have to tell me how you do that now, princess,” Ivan said.

“How she does what?” Misha asked as I walked to him. I would never get over feeling relieved when they came back safely. I hugged his neck before moving to Andrei and Viktor.

“She said you guys were back, right as you walked into the penthouse. Only she didn’t hear you first,” Ivan said.

1/3

“You have been doing that a lot lately, spider monkey. How do you do it? Like can you hear us coming?” Andrei asked.

“Do you get notifications that you have thoughts to read like normal people get email notifications?” Misha asked, laughing.

“No, it’s not like that. I’m not in any of your heads either, for the record. I keeji telling you that I don’t go looking without permission. It’s more of a feeling You all feel different to me. You always have, so it’s easy for me to tell you apart, especially now that I’m hyper-sensitive to each of you,” I said.

“But you knew that Boss’s meeting was irritated the other day when it was just Viktor downstairs and you’re not as connected to him as the rest of us yet,” Andrei said.

“He’s not as connected as the rest of you, but that doesn’t mean I can’t still feel him. Viktor is probably the most even of all of us, so when he’s amused about something, it comes through strongly. He was amused that they was irritated, so it was easy to feel,” I said.

“Nice save, princess,” Ivan thought. He flashed me a quick grin when no one was looking.

“Shut up. I’m not lying. I’ve always been able to feel you guys. It’s just next el now.”

“What about when Andrei was looking in your head? How did you know that was happening?” Misha asked.

“She can feel it. Just like I can feel it when she does it to me,” Andrei said.

“I didn’t feel anything when she looked in my head. Am 1 brain-damaged? That’s a distinct possibility now that I think about it,” Misha said, trying to sound serious.

“No. Well, maybe. I’m guessing it’s unique to us. No one else seems to notice when we do it,” Andrei said.

“How did it go with Chen?” Adrik asked Viktor, thankfully changing the subject for now.

“Everything’s good. The mayor is interested in what we’ve got. He wasn’t surprised to hear that Henry has been framing him. He said he heard bits and pieces from the two police chiefs about it, but Henry is keeping his cards close to his chest. He hasn’t said too much to anyone else about what he’s got. So we just need to make sure that the mayor moves first on the information on Ricardo,” Viktor said. “The mayor was surprised that Chen was bringing him information, but he said he appreciated the discretion and he agreed to use Chen for the duration. He said he had more work for Chen once this project was complete, just to keep anyone from getting too suspicious.”

“This works out well for Chen,” I said, smiling. It made me happy to see him doing well enough that he didn’t need to deal any longer.

“The mayor was going to take a look at what we have from the journalist about Henry and get back to us. Everything will come through Chen,” Viktor said.

“Did you two see the mayor today?” Adrik asked Misha and Andrei. They both nodded their heads. “Did you get anything from him? Good or bad?”

“I didn’t feel anything bad,” Misha said.

“I didn’t either. I couldn’t see him when he was talking to Chen, which always gives me more accuracy. I didn’t feel anything off,” Andrei said. He glanced at me, tapping his temple discreetly, indicating he wanted me to look in his head again. When I looked, he showed me what he could see when the mayor was leaving after meeting with Chen. I could see his aura, but he also had dark spots, or holes.

I suddenly had an idea. “Misha, come here,” I said, extending my hand to him.

“Who are we looking for?” Misha asked.

416

Sephic

“You’re not looking for anybody. F’m trying to show you something I want to and think of a blank movie screen,” I said, I grabbed Misha’s hand and tried

but finally he saw it.

“Whoa! That’s what people look like to you?” Misha asked Andrei.

“Not all the time, but yeah,” Andrei said.

it this will work. Don’t think about anything, if you can. Maybe try roject what Andrel could see into Misha’s mind. It took me a second,

“Holy sh it, that’s awesome. Is everybody the same color?” Misha asked, complely enchanted by what he was seeing.

“No, different people have different colors. I’m not sure what the colors meat, to be honest,” Andrei said.

I let go of Andrei, then extended my hand to Ivan. “Squish, you’re next in my little experiment. Come here.”

“I think I know where you’re going with this, princess,” he said as he took my band.

Misha looked at me, confused. “Now what am I supposed to do?”

“I need you to replay what you just saw for Ivan,” I said.

“I can do that?” Misha asked, completely surprised.

“We’re gonna find out,” I said, grinning at him. He started to replay what Andei saw in his head. I could see it clearly right away, so I tried to push it to Ivan. I felt Ivan squeeze my hand, so I knew he was seeing what I was seen. Once I felt like he had the video clip in his mind, I let go of Misha to see if I could see what Ivan sees.

I saw the same short clip of the mayor, walking outside his house. His aura was visible, just like Andrei had seen, only now, I could see the outline of something else hovering just behind him. Wherever the mayor moved, it move with him.

I grinned at Ivan. “It worked,” I said. I looked back at Misha, asking, “want to see what Ivan sees?”

“Don’t ask st upid questions, gazelle,” he said as he took my hand. He was quiet for a minute, while he watched. I could feel Misha’s nausea as he saw what Ivan saw. “Is that what it always looks like?” he asked, still watching what I was projecting into his head.

“No, this one is actually faint. Some of them are really well-defined. This one doesn’t look firmly attached, either. Like it’s moving with the mayor, but it’s also hovering away from him. Some people have them literally sitting on them, or holding on to them,” Ivan said.

“Blink, Ivan,” Adrik thought. Ivan quickly shut his eyes. When he opened then again, he was normal.

“I can feel your nausea though, Misha,” I said.

Stephen stood up, walking to me. “Okay, I want to see. It might not work on in, but my curiosity is overriding my aversion to having you in my head,”

he said.

“I want to see what Ivan sees, too,” Andrei said.

I grabbed both of their outstretched hands, trying to project the final picture to both of their heads.

“I’m reevaluating my entire existence now,” Stephen said. His eyes were wid he was watching what no one else in the room could see.

Andrei was quiet for a moment as he looked. I had stopped projecting, thinking he was done, but he said, “wait, no. Show me again.” Stephen dropped my hand, so Andrei grabbed that one too. When he did, I could see what he was focusing on. It was difficult to see, unless you were looking for it, but

1/3

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you could clearly see the demon focusing on the dark spots in the mayor’s aura. Because the mayor was moving, it looked like the demon was just moving with him. But Andrei managed to slow it down so I could actually see the demon was not only staying with the mayor, but was constantly trying to force its way inside his auric field.

“How did you see that? I totally missed that, Bubba,” I said.

“I just remembered where the dark spots were. That’s gotta be how they get then,” Andrei said, taking a step away to lean on the counter.

I caught Adrik’s eye. Since my little idea had worked, I was feeling co cky. Instead of needing to touch him, I just pushed the images I’d just shown everyone else by touching them to him from across the kitchen. He looked surprised initially, but just as intrigued as everyone else.

“Blink, Boss,” Ivan thought quickly.

“Well, now we know that seeing other demons is going to bring both of yours to the front. Did mine do that too? Is this something you guys can eventually get a handle on?” I asked both of them, silently.

“I didn’t notice yours, princess, but I wasn’t paying attention. We’re going to have to keep an eye on it,” Ivan replied..

“I couldn’t see your eyes when you saw it, so I don’t know either. For now, though we at least know that seeing other demons makes ours get a little too excited,” Adrik thought.

“So. Many Dirty, Jokes.” I replied, trying not to laugh..

Viktor’s curiosity finally got the best of him. “Okay, somebody explain what you all just saw.”

“See if you can show him too, gazelle. I bet it’ll work. I’ll help if you need a boost,” Misha said.

I looked hesitantly at Misha, then looked at Viktor. “It’s up to you, Papa Bear, I know you don’t like me in your head.”

“Only because I know you’re going to force me to deal with things I’ve been pitting off dealing with. This is not that, so let’s try,” he said, walking to me. He very timidly took my hand. “What am I supposed to do?” he asked.

“You don’t have to do anything. Just try to clear your mind. She’ll show you, Misha said. He took a step closer to me, in case I needed a power boost

to let Viktor see.

I concentrated on pushing the short clip of the mayor to Viktor. Nothing happined for a few moments, so I grabbed Misha’s hand. Once I did, suddenly Viktor’s eyes went wide. He was seeing what everyone else had just sen.

Except that wasn’t the only thing that happened. Misha took over the movie. He fast forwarded until we were no longer watching the mayor. Now, we were watching Viktor with someone I didn’t recognize. I didn’t want to interrupt, so I didn’t ask for specifics. The guy was younger than Viktor and actually looked vaguely similar to him. They were talking quietly, but it was difficult to hear the conversation. The other man looked upset; he looked older than what he should have. He looked worn down, tired, like he had been put through the ringer.

Viktor, in his calm, paternal way, put his hand on this man’s shoulder. It seemed like an innocent thing to do, but when he did, we could clearly see the aura around the man become visible. The dark spots were everywhere. It was dim. This man was struggling. Viktor took his hand off his shoulder, but remained close to him. We watched as a white light came down from somewhere above them and hovered above them both. Neither of them saw it in the movie, but it was visible to us watching it.

It stayed still, hovering above them both for a moment, then we watched Viktor open his palm upward, toward the light. It landed in his palm. When it did, Viktor touched the man’s shoulder once more. This time, his aura lit up. We watched as all the countless holes filled in. As his aura got brighter, he looked stronger, younger, more vibrant..

Viktor took his hand off the man’s shoulder, once again turning his palm upward. He released the light upward, all of us watching as it disappeared above them. The man in front of Viktor looked stunned for a moment, but the he broke out in a huge smile. He grabbed Viktor, hugging him tightly.

as the movie ended for us.

Misha looked down at me, somewhat confused. I looked at Viktor, who looked so stunned I wasn’t sure he was going to be able to speak.

“Did you know that man?” I asked:

“That’s…that’s…my brother,” he said.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 417

417

Adrik

While Andrei and Stephen were watching Sephie and Misha show Viktor what we had all just seen, Ivan caught my eye. "What do you want to bet she's about to unlock his gift for him?" he thought.

"You might be right. She just unlocked a new level for us. Might as well unlock Vikfor while she's at it," I replied, unable to hide my smirk.

"What now?"

"She just showed me everything everyone else saw from across the kitchen. She didn't need to touch me to make it happen. That's been happening with thoughts and emotions, but never images."

"Can you see what she sees now?"

"I really want to look, but I also don't want to f u ck it up. She'll show me later."

"Coward."

"As shole."

We saw Misha look down at Sephie. He was clearly stunned with whatever the just saw. She looked at him, her eyes wide. Then she looked at Viktor. "Did you know that man?" she asked him.

"That's…that's…my brother," Viktor said. He was completely stunned at what he'd just seen.

Clearly they had just seen something new..

"What happened?" Ivan asked.

"Viktor just saw his gift in action, but I think we broke him," Sephie said silently to me and Ivan. "I don't know what to say to him. He's completely numb"

Ivan walked to Viktor, standing in front of him, trying to get Viktor to focus on him. "Sephie and Misha just showed you your gift, Viktor. I don't know what it looked like. She can show me, if you want her to, but I can tell you that you're the one that makes sure we don't need Stephen very often," he said. Viktor just stood there for a moment, not moving, not saying anything.

"Did he see his child?" Ivan asked Sephie.

"No and yes. It looked like a ball of light to me and Misha. It might've looked different to Viktor though, but he saw that he got help from something else
besides us."

Ivan reached out and put his hand on Viktor's shoulder. Viktor looked down at Ivan's hand, then back at Ivan's face. "This is going to be hard to hear, Viktor, but the help you're going to get isn't from any of us. It's from a soul you weren't able to meet, but one that is forever linked to you now. You've spent so much time focusing on the tragedy that you've missed the happy ending."

We could see Viktor look down for a moment, then back up to Ivan. "How is this possible?" he asked quietly.

I walked over to Viktor, hoping to help Ivan out. "Your unborn child cleared so much of its karma by signing up for that ending to its almost life. That soul is so grateful to you that it's willing to help you with your gift. Your gift wouldn't be possible without it. You're what can help fix people to prevent demons from getting in. You're the other end of the spectrum from Stephen. When it's too late for you to be of any good, then Stephen can still save the soul. But you're the first line of defense for people who haven't't let the demon all the way in. You're doing what you always do, Viktor. You're making sure people are safe and taken care of."

I felt Sephie walk up half beside me, half behind me, holding onto my arm. " had to go through all of that to make it here, Papa Bear. It was horrific, but you wouldn't be here without it and you wouldn't have a sweet angelic gift without it,"

1/3

"And apparently you're going to save your brother, which is also the complete other end of the spectrum from Stephen," Misha said. We heard Stephen laughing quietly behind us..

Viktor finally started to get a handle on himself. He turned to look at Misha. "How did you know that my brother was coming here in a couple weeks?"

"I didn't. I don't always control the movie. This was one of those times where was not at all in control," Misha said, shrugging his shoulders.

"You saw what you needed to see, Viktor. You've been avoiding this, but Bubba and Misha created a scenario where you couldn't avoid it any longer. They likely didn't know they were doing that, but their souls knew. It's become obvious to all of us that you've been avoiding me for quite some time," Sephie said quietly.

"Totally didn't know I was doing that," Andrei said.

"Me either. I stand by my earlier statement that I am not in control of the mbie at all times," Misha said.

We could see that Viktor was still struggling with accepting everything. "Ivan why don't you two go downstairs. Or go to the gym. Just get him away from everyone for the day. He deals with things better when he's not in front of everyone"I thought. Ivan nodded his head. Without a word, he just slid his arm around Viktor's shoulders and walked him out of the penthouse.

"Did we break him?" Misha asked. He was obviously worried about showing Viktor something he shouldn't have seen.

"I don't think so. We knew this was going to be hard on him. I think he's doing better than I expected him to, honestly," Sephie said.

"Okay, so explain his gift since I didn't get to see it," Andrei said.

"Viktor is the opposite to Stephen, much like you're the opposite to Ivan," I said. "You can see where people are weak in their auras. Viktor's able to fill those holes in, basically. But no human can do that so quickly without some kind of angelic help. So Viktor's unborn child is helping him."

Andrei looked to Stephen. "And I thought your gift was heavy, man."

Stephen laughed. "Same, Andrei. Same."

"Viktor is like the first line of defense against demons. Stephen is the last," Sephie said.

"So Andrei and Ivan are like visual detection systems, you and Boss are the tichy-feely detection systems, Viktor fixes those who are still able to be? fixed, and Stephen is everyone's last hope? And I'm just here for entertainment? I feel like that sums it up nicely," Misha said, trying to keep a straight
face.

"I'm not sure I could have said it as succinctly as you, Misha," I said, laughing at him.

"Somehow, I feel like it's slightly more nuanced than that, Misha," Andrei said.

"He did leave out a few details, but he got the broad overview. He's a big picture guy," Sephie said, shaking her head, laughing.

"You're right. We also have Sephie's demon warning system," Misha said. "I did forget that one. Good lookin' out, bro."

"You know, Vlad's been talking about hiring a new chronicler. His last one met with an unfortunate end. Misha might be perfect for the job," Stephen. said, in his normal, completely serious manner.

Read King of the Underworld by RJ Kane Chapter 417

Read King of the Underworld Chapter 417

The Read King of the Underworlde series by RJ Kane has been updated to chapter Chapter 417 .
In Chapter 417 of the King of the Underworld series, Sephie wakes up and prepares for her job as a waitress. She interacts with her neighbor, Mr. Turner, who jokes about finding her a perfect man. Sephie heads to work at a restaurant where she serves a meeting of crime bosses. Despite disliking the arrogant sons of the bosses, she tolerates the job for the generous tips. Sephie is privy to inside information but keeps it to herself..... Will this Chapter 417 author RJ Kane mention any details. Follow Chapter 417 and the latest episodes of this series at Novelxo.com.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane Chapter 417

King of the Underworld Chapter 417

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418

Adrik

We didn’t hear from Ivan or Viktor for most of the day. Finally, that evening. an let me and Sephie know that he had taken Viktor to the house.

“He’s okay, but he’s now having to deal with everything he hasn’t dealt with since his wife died. He mourned her. He never mourned his child. I decided to just get him completely away from everyone.” Ivan told us.

“Are you there now?” Sephie asked him.

“Almost. We’re on our way.”

“I want to know if this still works even when you’re that far away from us,” she replied.

I could tell what she was thinking. We’d never tested how far away the guys could be from her and still be able to feel anything from her.

“If he manages to fall asleep before you do and this still works, let us know. It’s act often we get a chance that you’re away from Sephie and not working.”1
told him.

“You guys want to know if I can still feel her, don’t you? That’s a solid plan. I’ll let you know.”

Sephie looked at me, her eyes swirling. I could feel she was worried about Viktor, but I could also feel that she was curious about how far away Ivan could be and still feel her and talk to her. I walked to her, pulling her against me. I loved watching her eyes swirl, but I hadn’t seen them do it since the addition of the purple. It was even more mesmerizing than before.

“When are we going to tell the Wonder Twins about your eyes?” she asked me.

I sighed. “I don’t know. They’ll figure it out eventually. I think they’ll be able to handle the surprise of it better than Stephen would have. He’s more overwhelmed than those two are about everything happening right now.”

She giggled softly. “They have been good about taking everything in stride. I think Andrei likes it when I snoop through his head now. I think Misha might be helping him deal with everything better.”

“How did you know you’d be able to show Ivan what Andrei sees?” I asked, resuming my eternal battle with her curls.

“I didn’t. It was a hunch. When Chen went to meet with the journalist, I asked Andrei if he’d snooped through the journalist’s head before. He hadn’t. I told him to do it this time, but I didn’t know why. When they got back, he let me see the journalist how he sees him and that’s what gave me the idea to call the acupuncturist. When they got back from the meeting with the mayor, he told me to look again. Since Ivan wasn’t with them, I was curious whether his gift would be able to work like that, so I wanted to try it figured I would need Misha to make it clearer for them,” she said. She was fidgeting with my shirt collar as she talked. Her eyes were still an ever-changing kaleidoscope of color.

I watched her for a few moments, a grin slowly spreading across my face. “And when it worked, you felt cocky so that’s when you discovered you could share it with me without having to touch me?”

She slowly raised her gaze, looking me in the eyes. Her eyes landed on green as her wide smile stretched across her face. “I mean, might as well have fun with it, right?” she said, hiding her face in my shoulder as she started to laugh.

God, I love her.

Later that evening, once the other guys had gone back to their apartments for the night, Sephie and I were alone. I was just about to ask her if she’d heard anything from Ivan, when we both heard him.

“Viktor finally went to sleep. More from exhaustion than anything, I think. He’s talked more today than he has in the past ten years,” he said to both of us.

“Poor guy. How is he handling everythir

Is his

*I think he’ll come around. He might need another day or two here, though. It helped tremendously to come here. He stopped thinking about everything he’s not doing at the bullding once we got here.”

“Keep him there as long as he needs. We can manage without you both for a few days,” I replied.

“Bright side, we know this works from a distance now,” Ivan said. We could both hear him chuckling as he said it.

“You’re sure he’s asleep?” Sephie asked.

“I’m sure. I went to get a glass of water a minute ago. I could hear him snoring. Han said.

Sephie looked to me. I sent a quick text to the other three, telling them not to worry about whatever they felt from Sephie in the next few minutes. Once it was sent, I gave her the okay.

“Okay, Squish. I want to see if you can still feel me even when you’re far away,” she said. “Tell me if and when you feel anything.”

I felt her anger starting to rise. She always impressed me with how controlled the could keep it when she was consciously using it. Her eyes turned black, which I still found to be incredibly hot. I tried not to think about that, snice Ivan was privy to my thoughts at the moment.

“I can feel your anger, princess,” Ivan said, laughing. “I can also feel how your demon eyes turn Boss into a horny little boy.”

Sephie looked at me, a look of surprise on her face, but she immediately burst into laughter.

“I can also feel your happiness right now. That one comes through strongly. You weren’t that mad, so it was faint. I might’ve missed it if I hadn’t been looking
for it.”

Sephie walked to me, pulling my arms around her. “Okay, last one, Squish, just because I’m curious,”I could feel her panic starting to rise, her eyes changing to white. She hadn’t panicked in a while. This time was different. It felt like she had more control over it. It got to the level that previously would have made her start hyperventilating, but she stayed outwardly calm.

“I can feel it. You can stop now. Please stop now. That one is the worst,” Ivan said.

“I agree,” I said. She looked up at me, a look of surprise on her face.

“It turned his eyes dark. Can you check to see if your eyes are dark now too, Ivari she asked.

There was silence for a moment, then Ivan came back. “Yep. Black”

I held her tighter against me. “I think it’s because when we feel your panic, we hint to destroy whatever is causing it,” I said.

“Yeah, even from the first night we felt it, nothing will put me into kill mode faster than feeling you panic,” Ivan said.

My phone beeped, then beeped again, then beeped a third time. I went to check it, as I rarely got messages, especially this time of night. It was Misha, Andrei, and Stephen. They all said the same thing: “I know you said don’t worry, but I felt her panic and it made me freak out too.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Apparently everyone else also hates feeling her panic warned the others we were doing this, but they still sent messages checking on her because of her panic,” I told Ivan and Sephie. Sephie walked to me, asking for my phone so she could reply to them and apologize.

“I’m so high maintenance,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“I’m not sure you understand what those words mean, princess. I would not use those words to describe you. But now we know that the connection is still there, even over shorter distances. I don’t know if we’ll have a chance to, but now I’m curious how it works for even longer distances,” Ivan said.

“I agree. This is quite a convenient trick to have. At some point, we’re going to have to let the others in on this, as well as our eyes, but for now, I’m enjoying this,” I said, chuckling. “Keep us informed on Viktor. Let us know if there’s anything we can do to help. Keep him there as long as he needs, too.”

2/3

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“Will do, Boss,” Ivan replied, as Sephie was still busy typing replies to the guys on my phone. When she finished and looked at me, her eyes were completely black once again. She wasn’t angry in the slightest. This was completely for my benefit.

“So, horny boy, what should we do now?” she asked, her sly grin stretching slowly across her face.

God, I love her.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 419

419

Adrik

I could tell from the look on Sephie's face that my eyes had turned dark in rosjonse to seeing hers go dark. "I'm beginning to understand why you have a hard time controlling yourself, even more than usual, when my eyes go dark. It's surprisingly hot," she said, chewing on her bottom lip as she looked at me. She hesitated for a moment, making me wary. I knew she'd been struggling with her fear and even though her eyes had been going black for a while, she'd never seen it. Knowing it happens and seeing it happen are two different things.

She studied me for a moment, like she was memorizing every detail. Her grin crept slowly across her beautiful face. "You're not angry in the slightest. right now. I'm really impressed," she said.

"I can say the same for you," I said.

"You've been doing this for a much shorter period than I have though. You mastered it much faster than I did," she said, as I took a few steps toward her. As I got closer, I could see her eyes were still mostly black, but also swirlin

"Is it alarming?" I asked, still not completely sure she wanted me to touch her yet.

She looked up at me, confusion evident on her face. "Why would you think that?" she asked.

"Your eyes are swirling. They're still mostly black, so I'm guessing mine are st black as well, but I can see the other colors swirling in the background. I can see the white mixed in."

"Do I feel scared to you?" she asked.

"No, I wouldn't say that. Cautious, maybe," I said, watching her chew on her

She cut her eyes up at me. I could see her cheeks flush and even feel the embarrassment she was feeling. "Because I know I'm about to be out of breath and I'm wondering how I'm going to stay quiet enough that Vitaliy and Aleksei don't hear."

She didn't even give me time to respond to her before her lips were on mine. She practically jumped on me, wrapping herself around me. The desire 1 felt for her was overwhelming on a normal day. What she hit me with was even stronger than anything I'd ever felt. It was primal.

She felt it just as strongly as I did. She ripped my shirt open, pushing it off my shoulders, as her lips never left mine. Seeing her lose control only served to turn me on more than I thought possible. I groaned into her mouth, my hands feverishly ridding her of her clothing while she helped. Once she was naked, I pushed her onto the bed. She moved farther onto the bed as she watched me pull my pants off and take the last two steps to her.

I ran my hand up her leg, enjoying watching her reaction to my touch. Instead of climbing on top of her, I grabbed her leg and flipped her over. I heard her gasp in surprise, but she didn't protest. I pulled her hips up as I climbed on the bed behind her. She sat up on her knees, pressing her body to mine as she twisted around and her lips found mine once more. She moare softly as my hands roamed over her body..

She pressed her hips back into mine and that was all it took. I pushed her shoulders down as I kept a hold of her hips. She arched her back, granting me access. I wasted no time, shoving myself inside her. I heard her muffled moon as she buried her face in the mattress. I could see her hands grabbing the sheets as I felt her pussy pulsating around me.

The tiny amount of control I had managed to maintain was now completely gone when she pushed her hips back into me harder. All I could think about was ravaging her. I didn't care how loud she got or who heard us. I wanted to make her scream.

I could feel her push her hips back into me, her legs spreading wider, trying to hit the perfect spot that she knew would send her flying over the edge. I grabbed onto her hips, pulling her back into me with each thrust. It wasn't long and I could feel her euphoria building. I reached up and grabbed her hand, guiding her to touch herself while I drilled into her. Her moans were even louder as she pushed herself even higher. I was sure if her face wasn't in the mattress that the guards outside the door would be able to hear her from here.

I felt her orgasm start as she worked her hips against me. I wasn't sure how long I could draw it out as she was absolutely driving me crazy. She shared her waves of pleasure with me as she felt them, bringing me into her complete euphoria. I could feel her start to come down from one orgasm just as the next one was building. It was like nothing I'd ever felt before whenever it happened. It just kept going until her moans finally pushed me over the edge with her. Even muffled, her moans were something I wanted to hear as often as possible for the rest of my life.

419

We were both breathing heavy, but I was worried about her catching her breath. I moved beside her so I could flip her over. She had a lazy grin on her face as she worked to catch her breath. Her eyes were closed and I couldn't feel her panic, so I was surprised when she opened her eyes and they were
white.

"You're okay, solnishko. Just breathe slowly. You're with me. You're safe," I started repeating. She normally closed her eyes when she would panic, but she kept them open this time. I started to feel her panic, but it was at a much lower level than it normally was when she couldn't catch her breath. She was trying to breathe slowly, as she held onto my arm and held my gaze Finally, she was able to take a deep breath and a small smile crept across.
her face.

I watched as the white in her eyes faded to the deep blue that I adored. "That was better. Have you figured out how to control it? I could barely feel your panic when it first started this time," I said, kissing her lips gently.

She reached up, her hand running lightly over my face. "I'm trying to get a hardle on it. I actually think seeing your eyes go dark in response to my panic helps calm me down, even though that sounds really weird to say out lid."

"I don't think it's that weird. Like I said earlier, feeling your panic makes me want to destroy whatever is causing it." I got up, pulling her up with me toward the shower. "Maybe you've needed something to focus on visually instead of only listening to me," I said as I walked us into the shower, turning the water on.

She wrapped her arms around me, resting her head between my shoulder black. "It all helps." I felt her sigh as she hugged me tighter. I turned toward her, pulling her under the warm water with me. Her eyes were still de blue as she smiled sweetly at me.

I found myself completely lost in her for a few moments. It was these moments, those seemingly insignificant moments that were some of my most favorite with her. Little moments where I knew she was just as overwhelmed with the love she has for me as I was with the love I have for her.

Her smile grew as she rested her head on my chest, her arms wrapping around me tightly. I held her just as tightly as we both felt my pull in our chests and her warmth throughout our bodies.

"I could stay like this forever," I thought, not wanting to break the peaceful silice between us.

"I find myself thinking about how many times we've had moments like these, not just in this lifetime, but in every lifetime we've spent together. I hope you never get tired of them, because I don't think I ever will," she responded.

"Never. I love you. Always and forever."

"I love you. Plus infinity. Plus one."

BOST

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 420

420

Ivan

Viktor was exhausted last night when he finally went to his room, so it didn't surprise me that he didn't get up at a normal time this morning. It was strange to be at the house without Boss here. It was nice though. The house hid become our sanctuary. The place we could go where we didn't need to constantly be on guard. The place where we could just relax for a few days. We were always happy when Sephie wanted to come here. It gave us
more of a break than it did her. I think.

1

I think she knew that. I think most of the time when she asked to come here she was asking more for us than she was herself. This situation with Viktor really bothered her. She knew he'd been avoiding het for weeks. It was hard for her to not take that personally. I still wasn't completely convinced that Viktor was as happy about finding out he had a gifts everyone else was. Even with the way Stephen's gift happened and the back story that went along with it, he was much happier about it than Viktor.

It felt like Viktor was an outlier now. We all had very close connections with Suphie. I had an even closer connection with Boss now, too. I can't be sure, but I think somehow Misha and Andrei are becoming even more connected with each other as things progress. But Viktor. He's wanted no part of it. It has me worried.

He finally woke up after I was done with my workout and on my way back to shower. He looked like he hadn't slept well, even though he was pushing 10 hours by the time he decided to get up. If he drank, I'd say he was hungover.

"You don't look like you slept very well, man," I said when he stopped in the hallway.

"I didn't," he grumbled. He just turned and walked toward the kitchen.

After my shower, I decided to force him to go to the lake, after a short conversation with Sephie.

"I'm not sure what to do with him, princess. He's hella grumpy this morning. He said he didn't sleep last night, even though he didn't wake up until late this
morning."

She was silent for a few moments. Almost long enough that I was worried she hadn't heard me. I could feel her emotions all over the place, at least, so I knew she was trying to come up with a solution.

"Take him to the lake. It's not the best time of year for it, but at least it's sunny today. I don't know why he needs to go there, but he needs to go there. That spot is magic."

"No arguments from me there. I'm honestly not sure if he's even been there. Step either."

"I don't think they've been there. They rarely stay at the house with me when we there. But I feel like it will help. No idea how, so don't ask me details."

I chuckled. "If I haven't learned to trust you yet, then there's something seriously wrong with me, princess."I could hear her laughing, as well as feel her happiness. Since I had paid attention to the connection last night when we were experimenting, it now felt stronger.

Clearly, it was that way for her as well. I was quiet for a moment, still worrying over Viktor, when she said, "there's something else, isn't there? You're worried about him?"

I laughed. "Of course, you'd notice. Side note, the connection feels stronger since our experiment last night."

"It does for me too. We should check Adrik later. I can feel you the same way I do when you're in the room with me this morning."

"Same, princess."

"Now tell me why you're still worried about him. Did something happen? I've never fished in anyone's head from this distance, but I'll give it a try if you make
me."

"No need. Nothing happened. I just caught myself thinking about him this morning when I was working out. He's like the outlier of the group now. It used to

420

be Stephen, but he seems like his connection has gotten much stronger with you. I think the Wonder Twins are building their own connection between the two of them, as well as having stronger connections with you. Viktor seems like he hasn't wanted any of that. Like, he almost feels like Stephen, before Stephen told us all he was g ay. Like Viktor is hiding something he doesn't want the rest of us to know."

"I think you're right, Squish. He definitely hasn't wanted to be a part of it. I don't know about him hiding something though. He might just be sp ooked when he learned what Stephen had to go through for his gift. He probably suspected he would have a similar experience and was trying to avoid it. If Misha was right, though, Viktor will at least use it on his little brother, so maybe we have to wait until he comes before Viktor finally wraps his head around everything."

"Great. He said he's not coming for a few weeks. I don't know if I can deal with himpy Viktor for that long. He's an a ss when he's grumpy,"

She laughed, her joy once again coming through the connection strongly. "I might pay to see that. I'm not convinced it's possible."

"Oh, it's possible. You'll be glad he's avoiding you once you see it."1 was hit with her sadness once I mentioned him avoiding her, but she tried to quickly hide it with laughter. "Don't be sad about it, princess. He still loves you. What's happening with him is all him. It has nothing to do with you."

She was quiet for a moment, then she sighed. "I know. Thanks for the reminder. You're my favorite."

Viktor protested going to the lake, so I told him I'd kick his a ss if he didn't. "You don't have to talk, man. Just trust me. You need to go there. Get your da mn coat alteady."

He grumbled as he walked back to his room to get his coat, but he came out with it a few minutes later.

We walked in silence all the way to the lake. While I didn't mind the silence, I did find myself wishing that Sephie was here. She always knew just what to say. I didn't have the first clue on what to say to Viktor. This was going to be the quietest trip to the lake I'd ever had.

We sat by the lake for longer than I was expecting. Viktor was very much lost in his thoughts. He didn't make a move to go back to the house for almost two hours. It was me that finally broke the silence. "When does your brother come? Which one is it? Aleksander or Ilya?"

Ilya. Sasha is still in Germany. Ilya is done with his service. He wants to come here, at least until he figures out what to do next. He didn't sound so good when I talked to him last. I'm the one that talked him into coming here. He was going to go back home when he got out, but there's nothing for him there. So I talked him into coming here," he said.

"Give him a job. We could use the extra help," I said.

"That's what I was thinking. I'll see what he's like when he gets here. He's still getting over some girl. I think she did a number on him. Young love, 1 think," he said, shaking his head.

"When does he get here?"

"Next week. He said he had something to take care of before coming here, but he actually texted last night and said he's coming here earlier. Whatever it was he was taking care of isn't important anymore. I have a feeling he was trying to save whatever was left with the girl, but that must be off the
table now."

"It'll be good to get him to a new place, then. It's been a long time since I saw him. He was just a little sh it the last time I saw him."

"He's not anymore. He's as tall as me now. He's still a skinny sh it, but he's strong. Like Misha, it gives him a speed advantage. The last time I saw both of them, him and Sasha got into it. Aleksander did not fair well."

I laughed. Viktor's middle brother, Aleksander, was shorter than him but just as wide as he was tall. Nobody ever messed with Aleksander. "Sometimes it's good to be humbled," I said, still laughing at the thought of his brothers fighting.

"He might not agree with you, but Ilya definitely does," he said. He finally laughed. I could see some of the tension he'd been carrying around since yesterday morning melt off him. Sephie was right. This place is magic.

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Ivan

I didn't ask about anything serious while we were at the lake. I figured if he wanted to talk about it, he would talk about it. It took until we got back. to the house for him to bring it up.

"Sephie's mad at me for avoiding her, isn't she?" he asked.

"Not mad. She's hurt. Maybe worried you're scared of her. Bat she also knows that you've been avoiding whatever it is you're dealing with more than her."

He nodded, sighing. "It's not her. I need to make sure she knows that. I've been suspecting whatever weird thing was going to happen to me would either involve my wife or child for a while now. I've been having dreams about them both very often lately." He looked at me, his eyes were clearly troubled.

"What kind of dreams?"

"Some are good, some aren't so good. Since they were killed, I've regularly had dreams where it's like my life if they hadn't died. They're both still alive. Those are almost harder to take than the ones where I relive her death seeing the kid grow up is sometimes too much," he said. He was struggling to keep the tears in his eyes from falling.

"It's his kid trying to give Viktor back what he lost," 1 heard Adrik say in my head, "Sorry, man. I was about to check on him and heard Viktor in your head."

I appreciate the assist," I said, trying not to outwardly laugh.

"Viktor, your kid is forever linked to you now. Whatever karma that little soul teared by dying the way it did, it must've been a lot, because that soul is forever grateful to you now. It's trying to thank you. The dreams are a way of trying to give you back what you lost," I said.

"His kid has also agreed to not come back so it can stay and help Viktor. Can't reisember if we told him that already or not," Adrik said.

"Now that all this has happened with all of us, your kid has made the decision to not come back, specifically so it can always be there to help you."

Viktor inhaled deeply. "I know. He told me last night." He looked at me, almost like he wasn't sure if I'd believe him. "We were going to name him Konstantin if he was a boy. We were both hoping for a boy. We never found out if he was a boy or girl before they died, but he's always a boy in my dreams. I can still hear my wife calling him Kostya as she would rub her belly guess he decided to keep the name."

As Viktor was talking, I felt Sephie's sadness coming on strongly. I couldn't feel her in my head, so I wasn't sure she was listening in with Boss, but I could feel her sadness.

Viktor continued. "He came to me last night in a dream. He told me everything. It was like you and I talking right now. Everything was so clear. He also told me Ilya needed my help, just like Misha showed me. He said it was him showing me, not Misha. He knew I'd been avoiding Sephie, too, so he used Andrei, Misha, and Sephie to force me to realize my gift."

"He's still focusing on the tragedy more than the good that's going to come out of," Adrik said. "I don't know if you can feel the sadness, but it's not Sephie. It's him. Her eyes are amber, but this is not her sadness."

"Viktor, I think you're still focusing on the tragedy more than you're thinking about all the good that's going to come from this. Your gift is what you do anyway. It's just to a new level. You always make sure everyone has everything they need, that we're all taken care of, and you do it without most of us realizing it most of the time. Your gift really isn't that different. You're just making sure their souls are taken care of, instead of just their bodies. I can see if Sephie and Misha can show you what I see when I see demons trying to get in and what it looks like once they've gained access. It's not pretty. It's not something that anyone should have to endure. You're making sure that doesn't happen."

He was quiet for a few minutes, before finally saying, "I've been focusing on the tragedy for so long that I don't know how to stop." He got up, without another word, and walked to his room.

"When is his brother coming? Sephie showed me what Misha showed Viktor. It's going to take that happening before he comes to terms with everything." Adrik asked.

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"We just talked about it earlier. He's coming next week. He seemed like he was better when we were of the lake. We talked about his brothers and he seemed like he was slightly better."

"It's going to take time, Ivan. I was going to ask if we should come to the house to, but I think it's better that he's there with you."

"Yeah, I agree, even though I feel like I have no idea how to help him

"I think he just needs time and reassurance. It appears you have help from multiple angles, so hopefully between all of us, we can get him through this."

"I think he needs a few more days. You're still okay without us?"

"Yeah, you guys can stay through the weekend. We'll manage."

"He did say he needs to make sure that Sephie knows it's not her he's been avoid. He asked if she was mad at him earlier."

"She's not mad. She's more hurt than anything. She's also worried he's scared of her.

"That's what I told him too. At some point, he'll make that right again."

"It'll all work out. This is all a bit much for all of us to deal with. It's understandable."

"If you guys come up with any insight on what to say to him again, let me know can use all the help I can get right now.

Viktor stayed in his room most of the day. This was going to be a long few days….

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Adrik

I looked at Sephie's amber eyes as she stood in front of me. She'd just heard the last bit of the conversation between Ivan and Viktor, as well as me and Ivan. I knew she felt Viktor's sadness. It was very different than anything ever felt from her. I didn't realize he was struggling with it as much as he clearly has been for the last few years. Even Sephie was struggling to get a handle on it.

"I didn't realize he was struggling this much with everything," she said quietly

"None of us did. I think we know now why he always kept so busy. I can feel his sadness through you. I can also feel that you're struggling to deal with it, the same as him," I said, pulling her closer to me.

She rested her head on my chest. "Yeah, this is a lot." She folded her arms up in front of her, pressing her body even closer to mine. "I feel really cold."

"Come. We'll go upstairs and get one of my sweatshirts for you and I'll make you something warm to drink."

"Your meetings are done for the day?" she asked, following me out of my office. I nodded, my heart threatening to stop at the smile that stretched across her face. "Good."

We met Stephen in the elevator. "We're going upstairs. She's cold," I said, as Sophie went back to the same position she was just in before we left my office.

He chuckled. "Seems like as good of an excuse as any to leave the office."

"Where are the Wonder Twins?" I asked. Sephie giggled against my chest. She still found it funny that I used her nickname for Misha and Andrei.

"They're on a quick errand, but they should be back shortly," Stephen said. He cut his eyes at Sephie, who wasn't looking at him, then looked at me. with a small smile. I knew they were planning something, I just wasn't sure what yet. "I'll tell them to come upstairs when they get back," he said. pulling out his phone..

We had just walked out from grabbing one of my sweatshirts for her when Andrei and Misha walked in. They were each carrying a box, each had giant grins on their faces.

"Spider monkey, we got you something," Andrei said as he walked to the kitch. He set the box down on the counter, then slid it over toward her. Her face brightened for the first time since we'd overheard Viktor talking to Ivan. The heavy sadness that was attached to her lifted for a moment. She opened the box and her heart-stopping smile stretched across her face. "I don't know the first thing about baking, but we found a baker that makes lemon sugar cookies," he said.

"We also got a box of orange, since you and Boss are basically the same person now. We figured you'd want to experiment and see if lemon is still your favorite, now that you know orange is his," Misha said as he set his box on the counter, sliding it toward me.

"You guys are the best," she said, as she went to Andrei, then to Misha.

As she looked up at Misha after hugging him, he was clearly confused. "Gaze you feel happy right now. Why are your eyes amber?"

"They're still amber?" I asked, walking toward her to see.

"Why are you sad, Seph?" Stephen asked.

"It's not hers, is it?" Andrei asked.

She looked at him, a small smile on her face. "Bubba's right."

"How did you know?" Misha asked Andrei.

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"It feels different." Andrei said. Stephen got quiet, like he was trying to see if he could feel a difference. He looked at Andrei, then to me. "It's colder. No wonder you needed a sweatshirt," Stephen said.

"That's why Adrik and Andrei picked up on it so quickly. They're always warm. They noticed the difference. You and Misha tend to be cooler so it wasn't so obvious," she said. Misha had been doing his own checking as they talked. He finally felt the difference as well.

"Yeah, I don't know if I would've noticed that if I hadn't been looking for it. Misha said. "Where's it coming from if it's not you?"

"Viktor," I said. I looked at Sephie, having a silent conversation about whether we should tell them about our newest trick. She smiled at me, leaving the decision completely up to me.

"Your connection to him is already that strong?" Misha asked.

"It's a little more complicated than that," I said.

"It has something to do with you being able to talk to Ivan without words, deesn't it?" Stephen asked.

I was surprised, just as Sephie was. "You know?" she asked.

He nodded. "He came up with answers that he couldn't have known without talking to you. He also has a special connection to Sephie that the rest of us don't have, so it makes sense he'd be able to do so, just like Boss can. The three of you share a few special things."

"Really? You can talk to him the same way you can talk to Sephie?" Misha asal.

I nodded. "It only just started happening, but yeah. I went to check on Viktor arlier and we overheard a conversation between him and Ivan. That's when her eyes changed. She can feel his sadness."

"What else can you do? Stephen said there were a few things," Misha asked.

Sephie couldn't keep her grin from her face. "I think you should show them. They're going to find out eventually."

I chuckled, closing my eyes. When I opened them, I looked at Sephie first. Her eyes switched to black immediately when she saw mine, which confirmed that mine were also black.

"HOLY SH IT! You can do it now too??" both Misha and Andrei said.

"So can Ivan," Stephen said. "Are you guys considering adding adult diapers to your wardrobe right about now? Because I did, when they first showed me."

"Solid life choice," Andrei said, still completely astonished.

"But how? Do your eyes change the same way hers do now, too?" Misha asked

"I think that's going to remain true for her only. But the reason hers turn black is because her demon is stepping forward when it happens. Same for me and Ivan," I said.

"But I don't feel nauseous when it happens. I've never felt nauseous when her eyes have gone black. It usually makes me happy because I know there's about to be some f u ckery afoot," Misha said, grinning at Sephie.

"You wouldn't feel nauseous with us, my adorable Russian guardian," she said, Miding her arm around his waist. "Our demons work for us."

Misha's eyes went wide as he looked between me and Sephie. "You just unlocked a new life goal for me," he said quietly.

"Me too," Andrei said.

As always, Stephen offered the comic relief in the most serious way possible Tokay, so we all agree to learn how to do this now. Vlad is going to be ecstatic when he hears about this, but we're going to need to step up the training. Mehmed's Janissaries are no joke and when they see our black eyes,

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they're going to be scared, which will make them fight harder. We might need to increase the number of impalings happening, just to keep the fear working for us, rather than against us."

Sephie laughed, walking to Stephen. "I love you, Yoden. Please never stop being you."

"Can't stop, won't stop," he said, hugging her tightly, an uncharacteristic smile across his face.

"Who wants cookies?" she asked. She had a wide smile on her face, but I could still feel the heavy sadness from earlier surrounding her. It was starting to worry me that she couldn't get rid of it, even though she was doing what she does best and smiling through it.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 423

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Adrik

Ivan and Viktor stayed at the house for the rest of the week and through the weekend. Viktor's youngest brother, Ilya, was supposed to arrive Monday evening, so they came back late Monday morning. Sephie and 1 had talked to an periodically over the weekend, but it seemed like Viktor still wasn't completely ready to fully accept everything happening.

Sephie was wary about being around Viktor now, too. She was worried she was going to make something worse for him. Ivan had said Viktor had talked some over the weekend, but he was mostly staying quiet. When Ivan told us they were on their way back, Sephie took the Wonder Twins upstairs to the penthouse.

"I have an idea for an experiment anyway," she said, her sweet smile on here. She was using it as an excuse to not be around when Viktor got back. The heavy sadness that was from Viktor was still with her. She'd been quiete han usual most of the weekend. The guys all tried their best to cheer her up, but they could feel her struggling against it as well. None of us knew how to get rid of it.

"What experiment now, love?" I asked her, curious.

"You'll see," she said, grinning at me. For a brief moment, the sadness lifted. Her eyes had stayed amber for almost the entire weekend. They would change briefly now and then, but even her eyes weren't changing like normal, er emotions were constantly changing, which meant her eyes were constantly changing. But right now, it felt like the overwhelming sadness was the dominant emotion and was overriding all other emotions. It was

starting to worry me.

I stuck my head out of my office door, motioning for Andrei and Misha to come to the office, instead of her having to go to them. Since I'd learned she was self-conscious about people looking at her, I tried to make sure I was hith her as often as possible or that she didn't have to walk across the floor very often. I'd started paying attention to the people in the office as they watched her, as well. Most were fascinated by her, but she was still dealing with everything from being taken so it still felt negative to her.

"Take her upstairs," I said as they walked in. I watched as they looked at each other, seemingly having a silent conversation between the two of them. Misha clearly won whatever contest they were having. He walked to Sephie, schatting down in front of her while Andrei walked behind her and picked her up so she could wrap her arms and legs around Misha.

She giggled as Misha bounced her higher. "I know I can jump again, but not gonna lie, I prefer to be picked up like the princess I am," she said, hugging Misha's neck a little tighter.

"It's easy when you're still too skinny," Andrei said, grinning at her.

She glanced back at me, a devious grin on her face. "Bubba said I can eat more cookies, so I'm going upstairs to eat more cookies."

I just laughed as they walked out of the office as Stephen walked in with my next meeting. While she hadn't been in my life for an entire year yet, I almost couldn't remember my life before her.

I could feel her have moments of happiness, as I'm sure she was laughing and joking with Misha and Andrei during my meeting. Once that meeting left, I had a few minutes before the next meeting arrived that I was planning on using to catch up on some paperwork. As I got started, I figured out her experiment.

She was at her piano, but I could hear her just as well as if I was in the same room as her. "This makes paperwork so much more enjoyable, solnishko,"

"It works?"

"It does. I can hear you just as well as if I were in the same room." I could hear her soft laugh as she continued to play while I continued to look through boring reports.

Ivan walked in my office without Viktor. "He'll be down in a minute. Aleksander called when we got here. I guess he talked to Ilya before he left to come here. It might be worse than we thought from what it sounded like," he said.

"That doesn't sound good. When does he get here?" I asked.

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Ivan looked at his watch. "Not for a few more hours. Viktor still has to leave st upid early to make it to the airport since he's flying commercial. I hate that airport," he said, a clear look of disgust on his face.

"It is very peopley there," I said in agreement..

"Where's the princess?" Ivan asked.

I could still hear her playing in my head. "She's upstairs," I said, as I shared bet impromptu concert with Ivan.

"That's impressive," he said. "Did she just figure out she could do that?""

I glanced toward the open door, expecting Viktor to walk in at any point. "She worried about being around Viktor. She was looking for excuses to go upstairs to try and give him space."

Ivan nodded in understanding. "He's some better. I'm hoping seeing Ilya will help him. She's still sad, isn't she?"

"Yeah, it's starting to worry me. She can't get rid of it. Her eyes have stayed amber the entire time you two have been gone. The Wonder Twins and Stephen have tried their best to keep her distracted and find ways to make her laugh, but it's always short-lived. The sadness is becoming oppressive. I don't know how Viktor has handled it if he's been walking around with that for this long."

Before Ivan could respond, Viktor walked in. He did look better after his short time away, but it was obvious he was still struggling to come to terms with everything.

"Everything okay, man?" Ivan asked.

"Yeah, Sasha is worried about Ilya too. He talked to him before his flight. He said he hasn't ever heard him like that. I guess the girl he thought he was in love with really did a number on his head," Viktor said.

"Hopefully some time away from it all can help him clear his head," I said. "Give him a job, if he wants it. We could use the extra help."

Viktor chuckled. "Ivan said the same thing. I'm waiting to see how bad he is before I offer him a job, to be honest."

"Fair. Totally fair," Ivan said.

"Where's Sephie?" Viktor asked.

"She's upstairs with the Wonder Twins. She wanted playing time while it was quiet," I said.

I almost expected him to want to go upstairs then, but he stayed quiet.

"He's totally still avoiding her," Ivan thought.

"Agreed."

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Sephie

My experiment helped me channel some of the sadness I’d been feeling from Viktor, but it still didn’t get rid of it completely. I knew this kind of sadness. I’d felt it when my mom died, but even then, I had an easier time geting over it than this. It was like a cloud was following me everywhere 1 went. I’d have moments where I felt a little better, but the sadness would always return. Along with the cold. I hadn’t been this cold since I was in the hospital after (in and I were taken. I was quickly becoming convinced I was incapable of feeling warm any longer. I doubled up on my warmest clothes, which helped, but not enough. Andrei was happy to be on heater duty anytime I needed him, but even that isn’t enough. They’d all tried their best over the weekend to help cheer me up as best they could and I loved them for it. The moments where I got a reprieve were great, but very short-lived.

Ivan walked into the penthouse after I was done playing. I was making yet another cup of coffee when I saw him. “Squish!” I said, immediately running to him.

He caught me mid-air and held me off the floor in a bear hug. “Princess, I missed you.”

“I missed you, Squish. Life isn’t the same without you here,” I said, hugging his a little tighter. His grip on me tightened as well, popping my back in the process. I groaned in relief. “Apparently you’re my chiropractor now, too, said, laughing.

When he set me down, Misha asked, “how’s Viktor?”

Ivan sighed. “Not as good as I’d like. He won’t talk very much about it either so trying to figure out how best to help him is next to impossible. You guys have felt her sadness all weekend, too?” he asked, looking between Andre and Misha.

“Yeah. Stephen can feel it too. We’ve been trying to find ways to help cheer her up, but nothing lasts very long,” Andrei said.

“Her eyes have stayed amber almost the entire time, too. I think I’ve only seen them change the one time when Boss showed us his demon eyes,” Misha said. Even Misha sounded more somber than usual. I think it was beginning to affect everyone.

“They know we can do this now, too, by the way,” I thought. “Stephen actually figured it out before we told them. He’s wicked smart.”

Ivan chuckled, but looked at me curiously. “Yours change when you see ours change, but did you feel anything different when it happened?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did it give you relief from the overwhelming sadness you’ve been carrying around?” he asked.

“Um, I don’t exactly remember. I might have. I get moments of relief, but they’re just moments right now. I don’t remember ever feeling this way before,” I said. “And I don’t know how to get rid of it. Nothing I’ve tried has worked for very long.”

Ivan was always good for solutions. He thought for a minute, then looked to drei. “You haven’t seen anything weird around her, have you?”

“No, but she’s dimmer than she normally is,” he said.

I set about starting to make dinner as they discussed possible solutions to our latest unexplainable problem. The fact that Viktor kept himself constantly occupied for so many years was starting to make more sense. Distractions definitely helped, but it was only a temporary solution.

Adrik and Stephen eventually came upstairs, along with Vitaliy and Aleksei. W were all waiting on Viktor to come back with his brother. When they finally walked in, both of them looked like they’d had the world’s toughest conversation on the way back from the airport.

Even though things were awkward with Viktor, I was still relieved to see him and greeted him like normal. “Papa Bear!” I said as I went to hug his neck. His brother was somewhat surprised when Viktor wrapped his giant arms around me and picked me up like normal.

1/3

“Sestrichka, this is Iva,” Viktor sakt, motioning to his younger brother.

He smiled warmly at me, finally putting it together. “You must be Sephie,” he said, extending his hand to me. “I’ve heard quite a bit about you.”

“It it was good, then he was just being modest. It it was bad, then he was lying” I said, taking his hand. As soon as my palm came into contact with his, much like with Stephen, I was hit with very specific memories from Ilya all at once. These memories revolved around a woman. I could see the evolution of their relationship, I could also see the subtle manipulations that Liter turned into all-out me ntal abuse, along with the heartbreak and trauma during the breakup. To say she did a number on him was an understatement. But more than that, I could feel he was struggling against his own darkness. And he was losing. I suddenly felt like someone had thrown into a wall and I was gasping for air.

I must’ve done something weird, or zoned out, because I suddenly had Adrik and Ivan beside me. I’d put my contacts in before he got there, hoping to not completely scare the poor kid, so I knew it wasn’t that. I could feel Andrei, Misha, and Stephen on guard behind me, as well.

liya took a step back from me, his eyes the size of saucers, and Viktor steppet in front of him, like he was protecting his little brother from us.

“Viktor, calm down. I can explain what just happened to her and why they rected that way,” Andrei said, quickly rushing to my side as well.

I was having a hard time focusing, between the overwhelming sadness from Vitor and now the darkness from Ilya. It felt a little like I was drowning. I reached for whoever was beside me and felt Adrik’s arm go around my waist hral Ivan’s hand caught mine.

“You’re freezing, Sephie,” Adrik thought.

“I can 7…Ft…anger,” was all I could manage to get out. My body was starting to shake, but I think this time it was legitimate shivering instead of my weird response to trauma. I was getting colder by the second..

“Nun, she needs our anger,” I heard Adrik say in my head. As soon as he said that, I could feel them both sending me their anger. They were both holding back. It wasn’t enough.

“More. All of it.”I told them.

1 got hit with a wave of fire. It was so intense that it almost took my breath away, but it helped clear my mind and it pushed the darkness completely back. I could feel my own body again. I realized Adrik was basically holding me up. I stood up on my own, looking between him and Ivan.

“Better,” I said.

While Andrei had told Viktor he could explain, he was distracted by feeling yah and Adrik’s anger through me. He was somewhat stunned into silence. Everyone knew something was happening, they just didn’t know what yet.

“Somebody better explain something in the next 30 seconds or we’re out of here,” Viktor said, his deep voice booming. I’d never heard Viktor angry, but he was clearly angry right now. It almost surprised me to hear him angry

“She got hit with all your brother’s pain and darkness that he’s been carrying around since his breakup when she shook his hand. She’s also been carrying around your years of sadness that you never dealt with all weekend long. It was too much for her. When Boss and Ivan felt her start to falter, they got protective,” Andrei said. He paused for a moment, looking at Ilya. “You know there’s more to it, but I don’t know how detailed you want me to get right now.”

“He knows enough. You can speak freely,” Viktor said. Anger was still prevalent in his tone..

“Her demon tried to save her when she got hit with Ilya’s darkness. She’s just wearing her contacts, so you couldn’t see her eyes go black. Anytime her demon steps forward, it makes theirs do the same. Oh, by the way, they can do it too,” Andrei said, sharply. It was almost like Andrei was angry that Viktor was angry.

Viktor cursed under his breath. “When were you going to tell me that you can do that now too?” he asked, looking between Ivan and Adrik. He was clearly frustrated with both of them.

“Check your tone, Viktor. We just found out this weekend. You were already dealing with enough without one more thing on top of it,” Andrei said. When Viktor first spoke, Misha and Stephen had quietly stepped behind me. Ajdrei put himself in between Viktor and me as they were talking.

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I squeezed Ivan’s hand, letting it go so I could put my hand on Andrei’s back. I didn’t have to say anything, he just moved enough to the side so that I could see Viktor, who was still trying to get a handle on everything and was still more angry than anything. I glanced past him at Ilya, who was simply
a rollercoaster of emotion.

“Viktor, none of this really matters right now. What does matter is that Ilya is struggling even more than you know and you have the tools to fix that,” I said, flatly. “Both Andrei and Ivan can see it. I can feel it. But you can fix it with that, I turned to walk back to the kitchen. Everyone but Viktor and Ilya followed me.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 425

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Sephir

Viktor and Ilva quietly left the penthouse without a word to anyone else. We were quiet for a few moments, when Andrei finally broke the silence. He looked to Misha, saying, “I think you should confirm, but he’ll be back. He just needs time.”

Misha got his faraway look in his eye for a moment, then looked at Andrei and nodded his head.

room. As I walked down the hallway, I could feel the tears welling up

“At least it means I can take these contacts out,” I said, walking back to the in my eyes. I walked a little faster, trying to avoid having to fish floating contacts out of my eyes.

1 splashed water on my face, trying to get a handle on myself. I glanced in the mirror, noticing my eyes were swirling. At least they’re not amber anymore. As I patted my face with the towel, I did notice that I didn’t feel the overwhelming sadness anymore that I’d been feeling for days now. Moybe they burned it off

Everyone had concem written very prominently across their faces when I wafend back out. While I was still worried about Viktor and Ilya, I was also enjoying not feeling like I was overcome with sadness,

“I think you guys sharing your anger with me burned off the sadness. I actually feel much better now,” I said, smiling at Adrik and Ivan.

It caused Stephen and Misha to laugh. “I didn’t even know a human could get that angry without legitimately exploding and you’re like, ‘right. I feel much better now,” Misha said, laughing.

Vitaliy, always curious, simply said, “explain”

“When she got hit with whatever that was from Elya, she faltered and went kor rold. She’s insanely sensitive to cold. It was starting to consume her, to the point she was losing control. She managed to tell me and Ivan that she needed our anger. Clearly, we were holding back because she then asked for all of it,” Adrik said, smiling at me.

“Because we can feel what she feels, we all felt their anger through her. It’s w

said.

Andrei couldn’t give an explanation to Viktor right away,” Stephen

“How did she tell you? I didn’t hear her speak,” Vitaliy said.

“Yeah, so about that. She doesn’t need to with me and Boss atrymore,” Ivan sud.

Vitally looked to me, surprised. “This is true?”

“It’s true. It’s been happening with Adrik for a long time, just not with words how I can talk to Ivan too. It even worked when he was gone this weekend,” 1 said.

“That’s useful,” he said.

“You do feel better now, spider monkey. Your eyes are normal again, instead of amber, too,” Andrei said. I glanced around quickly to make sure no one would see, then tapped my temple so he would look in my head. I silently thanked him for not only being a buffer between me and Viktor, but for also jumping in so quickly with an explanation. He was the voice of reason in a velitile situation and I might’ve loved him a little more for it.

He gave me a wink and his handsome smile.

As we were clearing up from dinner, Vitaly finally asked what everyone had been wondering, but didn’t want to ask. “What if Viktor decides not to come back? I know you say he will, but he’s still free to make his own decisions. Maybe he decides this is too much for him.”

I sighed. “I have thought about that. I glanced at all the guys. “I kind of unwittingly bound all of them to me, but I haven’t with Viktor yet. They’re all still free to leave at any point, but I also bound our souls together, so they’n kind of stuck with me now until that agreement changes. I never did

that with Viktor.”

“What do you mean, Seph?” Steplfen asked.

“Did she pinky swear with you?” Misha asked, grinning. “Because she did with me and it’s one I plan to honor,” he said, winking at me,

Stephen laughed. “I actually feel much better that I’m not the only one who took that so seriously.”

“I thought it was how I helped you all discover your gifts, but then I never goth chance to do it with Viktor and now he knows his gift. I’m not sure what that means, honestly,” I said, chewing on my lip.

Adrik walked to me, a small smile on his lips as he watched my eyes for a moment. “I missed seeing them change. They were amber for too long,” he said, pressing his lips gently to mine. He pulled me against him as he spoke to Vitaliy. “I’m actually surprised Viktor is reacting this way to everything. He’s always been the voice of reason for me.”

“This is a high percentage of unreasonable occurrences, though. Everyone has their limit,” I said. “Maybe we just passed his. Maybe it was all out of order so it’s more chaotic with him. I don’t know. I don’t have the answers.”

“It wasn’t your fault he found out the way he did, princess. It was Kostya. Held Viktor he used you and the Wonder Twins to make it happen,” Ivan said. I looked to him, completely confused.

“She came in after that part of the conversation,” Adrik said.

“Viktor told me that his kid came to him in a dream the first night we were gone. He said he’s dreamed of his wife and kid regularly ever since they were killed. They were going to name the kid Konstantin and apparently the kid decided to keep the name. He knew that Viktor has been avoiding you, so he used Misha and Andrei to create the situation where Viktor could see his gift. It was his doing. You didn’t do anything wrong, princess,” Ivan said, his tone softening at the end.

I looked at Andrei. “That must be why I asked you to snoop in the journalist’s head. That’s what started everything and gave me the idea of how to figure out Viktor’s gift in the first place.”

“See? Always a reason,” he said, winking at me again.

Adrik sighed. “If Viktor decides this is too much, then we’ll deal with it when it happens. Until then, I don’t think it’s worth obsessing over.”

It was three days before anyone saw Viktor again. He completely disappeared the night Ilya came to the penthouse. No one could reach him. He didn’t tell anyone where he was going. He didn’t tell anyone that he was okay. He just vanished.

The guys knew he was back the third night, only because they saw light under his door when they all went back to their apartments for the evening. They were all so irritated with him that they left him alone. If he wanted silence, they would give him silence.

Ivan did let us know that he was back. “There’s a light on in his apartment. We could all see it under his door, but no one went to check on him. No idea if Ilya is still with him or not.”

“Thanks for letting me know, Ivan. I’m still not sure how I’m going to handle thine,” Adrik responded.

“Yeah, I don’t envy you on that one,” Ivan said.

Adrik sighed, clearly stressed about what to do with Viktor. On one hand, well knew he was struggling. On the other hand, he essentially deserted his duties, which he’d done before. Again, for good reason, but this was now a pattern.

He had climbed into bed first while he waited for me to finish up. He was rubbing his face in his hands when I climbed on top of him, straddling him.

“I think it’s on him,” I said, quietly. “He’s either going to accept everything that’s happened or he’s not. If he does, then we can figure out what to do. If he doesn’t, then he’s free to leave. This is a lot and I understand that. But not begging anybody to stay ever again.”

“I still think he’ll stay, but he needs to decide. He can’t keep running away from the decision. Once he decides, then the outcome will be much easier to determine,” he said, pulling me to him. I rested my head on his shoulder while he wrapped his arms around me, always grateful for the moments of

peace that I so readily found in his arms.

Chapter 426

426

Sephle

Viktor and Ilya were both in the kitchen the next morning when Adrik and I walked out. The rest of the guys hadn’t made it upstairs yet. I caught. myself wondering if that was on purpose or just a coincidence.

Viktor stood up, taking a step toward Adrik. “Boss, I need to apologize. I didn’t know what to do, so I ran. I was worried about Ilya too. I wanted to get him away from everything until…” he trailed off, like he didn’t want to finish the thought.

Adrik, in his usual silent way, didn’t respond right away. Even though Viktor knew his tactic, it was still effective. He continued talking. “I also owe you an apology, Sephie. I’ve been avoiding you because I knew you’d force me to deal with things I wasn’t prepared to deal with. Turns out I didn’t need to worry about you,” he said, trying to smile at me.

I looked at him for a few moments. He still looked troubled, but he looked better. I glanced at Ilya, who looked nervous, but he actually looked much better than the first time I saw him. He caught me looking at him, but he looked away quickly, almost like he was embarrassed. I looked back to Viktor, asking, “you fixed him, didn’t you?” Viktor’s cheeks flushed, but he nodded his head.

“Good. It would’ve killed him.” I looked at Ilya. “If you’d like to give me the name of the girl, I’ll happily kick her as s for you. And I’m going to say this, even though you’re probably going to think I’m crazy at first, but she wasn’t entirely human. Consider yourself lucky you got away from her when you did.” His eyes went wide as he glanced to Viktor.

Viktor just laughed. “She could probably tell you your life story after she shook your hand the other night. I didn’t tell her anything.”

Ilya looked at me again, saying, “I feel bad for the way we met last time. I didn’t mean to cause any problems.”

You shouldn’t feel bad. You needed it to happen, so it did,” I said, leaning against the counter after putting the coffee on.

Adrik walked to me, pulling me against him. “You’re going to have to decide, Viktor. You can’t keep running from the decision,” he said, matter-of- factly.

“I know, Boss. No more running. I promise. I saw what it did for Ilya,” Viktor said.

“You’ve technically seen it twice now. The question is, do you believe it now?” asked.

Viktor chuckled. “I do.”

“Have you talked to the guys yet? You know they’re irritated with you. Mostly because you lost your temper with Sephie,” Adrik asked.

Viktor looked at me, obviously remorseful. “I know. I talked to them this morning before we came up here. They’re giving us time before they come up. I’m sorry I got angry, Sephie. I didn’t understand that you’d felt everything that Ilya was feeling. I just saw Boss and Ivan’s eyes and freaked out. when they locked in on Ilya.”

“I mean, you wouldn’t have stood a chance against those two. No offense, Ily I’m sure you can hold your own. Just not in that situation,” I said. “I

understand.”

I felt Adrik sigh. “I need to know that you’re all the way in on this, Viktor. Whatever this is. If you want out, that’s fine. You’re free to go and no hard feelings. But if you stay, then you’re all in.”

I watched Viktor before he answered. There was still doubt there, but it was ich less than what it had been. I could still feel the sadness he’d been carrying around since his wife and child were killed though.

“Don’t answer, Viktor. You’re not allowed to make a decision yet,” I said. He looked at me, surprised. “I need you to ask Kostya to fix you the same way you fixed Ilya before you decide. The sadness and the grief that you’ve been carrying around for years have become so integrated in who you are that you almost don’t know life without them now. You can’t make important decisions when everything is clouded by grief. I felt what you’ve been dealing with. i had to go to very extreme measures to be able to get rid of it. Ivan met not be able to see anything on you, but that doesn’t mean it’s not there. You have a cloud you need to be rid of before you can decide and we all know there’s only one soul that can fix that.”

Viktor was quiet for a moment Adrik said, “she’s right. From the morning after you left with Ivan until the night she met Ilya, her eyes stayed amber and we could all feel the sadness from you through her. She couldn’t shake it. She feels everything intensely, but she also has remarkable control. She

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couldn’t shake this. She’d get mothents of relief, but they were just moments. You need to be rid of that too. It’s okay to let go. You don’t love them any less by moving on with your life. I think that’s what Kostya has been trying to help you with all along.”

Ilya stood up, walking to Viktor. He quietly put his hand on Viktor’s shoulder. “They’re right, you know.” He glanced to me and Adrik, trying to silently tell us he would take care of it. “Come on. I’ll be there the whole time,” he said as he pushed Viktor toward the door.

Once I heard the door close behind them, I said, “it’s going to take a few more days. Apparently, that’s why they were gone. Ilya was out for almost two days after Viktor fixed him. I don’t know if everyone reacts that way, but somehow I think Viktor is going to need some extra sleep.”

“How did you know?” Adrik asked.

“I could still feel his sadness. He tries to push it to the background, which is why I didn’t pick up on it all the time before. But now that I knew what to look for, I could still feel it. He’s learned ways to contain it, if you will, but it’s still there and just as strong.”

Adrik pulled me closer, kissing my temple. “We don’t always realize how lucky we are to have you.”

The other four guys walked into the penthouse, looking very concerned when they didn’t see Viktor and Ilya there. I couldn’t help but smile. “Don’t worry. We talked to them. I made Viktor fix himself before he makes a decision on whether he stays or goes. Apparently, that’s why they were gone for so long. It knocked Ilya out for a couple of days. I expect the same to happen to Viktor, so nobody panic if we don’t see them for a few more days.”

“He told you that?” Misha asked.

“No. I might’ve snooped in Ilya’s head when no one was paying attention,” Ised, grinning at him.

“Devious. I’ll allow it.”

We didn’t see Viktor or Ilya the next morning when everyone came upstairs for breakfast. We were all hoping it meant he was recovering.

“Princess, I’ve been thinking,” Ivan said, as we were cleaning up.

“Me too, but I still don’t quite know how we’re going to get our hands on that many pancakes or if red pandas even like pancakes,” I said. There was silence as they all tried to figure out just what the f u ck I was talking about. I just grinned at them as I watched their confusion.

“I’m so glad you’re back to normal now, gazelle,” Misha said, his wide smile stretching across his face.

I looked to Ivan, who still looked somewhat confused, but mostly amused. “What have you been thinking about, Squish?”

“I think there’s a way to keep what happened with Ilya from ever happening again,” he said.

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Sephle

“Please explain. Don’t worry about the pancakes, either. We’ll figure the logistics out later,” I said, grinning at him.

“Yeah, I’m still not even completely clear on exactly what happened with Ilya, so if you could enlighten me a little more on that, that’d be great. But, Seph, I’ve got ideas for mass production of pancakes. We’ll talk later,” Stephen said, completely straight-faced and putting his hand up to the side of his face like a phone indicating he’d call me.

Once Ivan finished laughing, he said, “you’ve always said Boss is your sword arul I’m your shield. I don’t think getting hit with Ilya’s memories and thoughts were what was too much. I think it was the cold that came with it. Eximbined with Viktor’s sadness, that was more than you could handle. I think there’s a way that I can keep that from happening again.”

Adrik walked to me, sliding his arm around my waist. “That’s why it’s always felt like Ivan’s anger is facing outward from you. So something like that can’t get to you,” he said, understanding where Ivan was going.

“Also why he puts me in a bubble, I bet,” I said. I looked to Stephen. “I’m still trying to figure out how you shared everything with me when I touched your arm. But at least I know you were trying to share everything with me. I’m not sure Ilya was trying to share everything with me. If it just randomly happened because I touched him, that’s going to make me never wht to touch anyone outside this room ever again.”

“Wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world,” Adrik said, smirking at me.

“Did you get everything from Ilya like you did with me?” Stephen asked.

“No, it was specific to the breakup he just went through and the relationship he had with that chick. She was really abusive to him the entire time, but it started out subtle. She wore him down over time with little manipulationis, but then it just turned into outright abuse at the end. He loved her. He started to believe all the horrible things she was saying to him and about him,” I said, thinking back to everything I’d seen and felt when I touched Ilya. I suddenly felt both Adrik and Ivan get angry. I looked up at both of them seeing their black eyes. “What was that for?” I asked, surprised.

“The sadness and darkness from those two that you couldn’t get rid of was creeping back. You said we burned it off last time, but apparently we didn’t get rid of it completely,” Ivan said.

“You guys noticed it before I did,” I said, quietly.

“Are you sure, princess? Your eyes went black when we felt it,” Ivan said.

“They did?”

“I saw your eyes go black, then Boss’s eyes changed without even needing to see yours,” Misha, who was across from us, said.

“It’s your demon trying to save you, spider monkey. It did it the other night, too,” Andrei said. “I can’t tell if it just knows that getting angry is the cure or if it’s asking Boss and Ivan for help, though.”

“How do you know that?” Ivan asked.

Andrei shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. I just know. But I think that’s what happened the other night. She started to struggle with everything she got from Ilya, her demon took over, and you two immediately went on offense without really knowing why.”

I chewed on my bottom lip, trying to come up with answers when I wasn’t even really sure of the question.

“Well, we do know that Sephie can handle insane amounts of anger. In fact, I think it makes her thrive. It would somewhat make sense that the opposite of that would be more crippling for her,” Stephen said.

“I don’t know. She’s so adept at handling her own emotions that I’m still surprised she struggled to get rid of Viktor’s sadness. I think it was the combination of both. It still feels like it’s the combination,” Adrik said.

1/3

“You can still feel it?” I asked.

“Not right now, but when you were talking about Ilya, I could. It’s very cold. It has something to do with the cold, which is why I think Ivan’s idea of him being able to stop it next time makes so much sense for you. If his anger is facing outward, it’s burning whatever is coming toward you,” he said.

“And Boss is there for anything that gets past me,” Ivan said.

“Did you notice anything on Ilya, Ivan?” Stephen asked. I could see him starting to try to connect things in his mind. Ivan shook his head no. Stephen looked to Andrei, asking him the same question.

“He was hurting, but I couldn’t see anything. When they came back, I could see his aura, but it was still dim,” Andrei said.

“What are you thinking, Yoden? Does it have to do with red pandas or pancakes?” I asked, trying to keep a straight face.

“Still pancakes, but now I’m also wondering if red pandas even like pancakes We should really find that out before we move forward with pancake production.”

I couldn’t hold my laugh in any longer. “I f uck ing love you,” I said.

“I’m still working on my theory. What do you know about the girl Ilya just broke up with? Other than her abuse toward him? Anything?” Stephen
asked.

1

“Not much, other than I’d happily kick her a ss,” I said. I was thinking back over what I’d gotten from Ilya, chewing on my lip again. When I looked up, they were all looking at me, slightly amused. I could see Ivan’s black eyes, but this time I didn’t feel his anger, nor did I feel Adrik’s. I turned to look at Adrik, whose eyes were also black.

“Did I do that again?” I asked, confused.

“Yours went black when you were thinking about the chick Ilya broke up with! You told him that she wasn’t entirely human. Your demon confirms it,”
Adrik said.

“When did you tell him that?” Misha asked.

“The morning after they got back. She was trying to make Viktor see how serious the situation was. She said it would’ve killed Ilya if he hadn’t fixed him. Ilya was apologetic, but Sephie offered to kick her as s, then told him she wasn’t exactly human and that he was lucky to get away from her.”
Adrik said.

“I was trying to be somewhat overdramatic at that moment, to be fair,” I said..

“Okay, dramatics aside, what if there was like a lingering effect from that chick still on Ilya. Like whatever demon that chick had was trying to break Ilya down enough that it could either jump to him or another demon could get into him. Ivan can’t see it because it’s not actually a demon, but we all felt the oppressive sadness from Viktor that Sephie couldn’t shake. What if it was the same sort of thing on Ilya? It just follows him around, wearing him down little by little until he’s finally weak enough that another demon con get in?” Stephen said.

“If I’ve learned anything from all this, it’s that there’s a reason for literally everything. Even knowing whether red pandas do, in fact, like pancakes. There’s a reason that Sephie got that cloud from Viktor and it looks like it was so we could figure out what happened to Ilya since neither Ivan nor 1 could see anything on him,” Andrei said, grinning at me.

“Do we know what happens when someone’s demon takes over completely and their soul either gets ejected or it dies? Does the demon stick with that body or does it jump to another one? Does it need a soul to work the body?” Stephen asked, looking at me.

“Why are you looking at me when you ask those difficult questions? I’m still working on the simple math problem of red pandas and pancakes. You jumped all the way to quantum physics,” I said.

“If one soul on one side of the universe gets ejected, does that mean a red panila on the other side of the universe also eats pancakes at the same time?” Misha asked, thoughtfully.

Adrik turned me to face him, trying to hide his smile. “You did this,” he said, pointing to Stephen and Misha.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 428

428

Sephte

It was three more days before anyone saw Viktor again. After the second day Ian and I started to get worried about him, so we decided to go check. The guys knew that Viktor was at least in his apartment this time. They could see the light under the door at night, Adrik sent Andrei and Misha with

us as well.

“I think he’s fine now,” I said, teasing Adrik about being overprotective of me.Viktor lixed him. It shouldn’t be an issue this time.”

“I don’t care. You’re still not allowed to touch him and you’re taking all three of them,” he said, very firmly. “Or else you wait until my meetings are done and Ivan and I will go with you. But you’re still not allowed to touch hij He had the slightest hint of a smile creeping up one side of his mouth as he laid down his ground rules.

“You’re very cranky,” I said, walking to him. Ivan was waiting just outside the door, along with the Wonder Twins. “It makes me want to f u ck it out of you,” I thought as I made my eyes go black. His immediately changed to blackin response and I was hit with his intense desire for me.

“You do not play fair, solnishko,” he responded. He groaned quietly as he pulled me to him, kissing me deeply. I heard the elevator doors signal the arrival of his next meeting. I pulled back so I could look at his eyes. They were still black. I quickly thought about how much I loved him, trying to make mine change to blue. For the first time, I saw his change from black to normal blue. The black slowly faded into the background as the blue mixed in and slowly took over once more. He raised his eyebrow, noticing my look of wonderment.

“I just saw yours change for the first time. Now I understand why you like watch it so much,” I told him. He pressed his lips gently to mine as Stephen walked in with his next meeting.

He said, in Russian, “I love you, solnishko. Come back when you’re done.”

“How could I refuse?” I responded, in Russian. I walked out of his office, grabbing Stephen’s arm on the way out.

“You guys look like you’re about to get into trouble,” he said, still speaking Rusian. Everyone preferred Russian during the day in the office. It kept everyone else from looking too closely at me. They knew they wouldn’t be able to understand anything they were saying, so they largely ignored the guys. People still stared a little too much for my liking whenever I was with them, but I was trying to get over my aversion to the attention.

The guys, in their usual protective way, did what they do best and kept me as ut of sight as possible from everyone else.

“We’re going to check on Viktor,” I said. “He wouldn’t let me go with just Ivan I’m also not allowed to touch Ilya.” I pointed to Ivan, then Andrei, and finally Misha. “So, it’s on you three to make sure I don’t touch him. I make no promises I’ll be able to control myself.”

Stephen laughed quietly, but he agreed with Adrik. “Until we know for sure what really happened, I think that’s sage advice, Seph. I don’t think you should touch him either.”

Ivan’s giant arms wrapped around me, trapping my arms to my sides. “Okay, ncess. We’ve got it covered. Let’s go.” He started walking us toward the elevator, making me laugh.

I knocked quietly on Viktor’s door. Ilya opened the door soon after, surprised to see us all standing there. He looked even better than the last time I’d seen him. The first time I saw him, he looked much older than his actual age this time, he looked younger. Much healthier and much more vibrant. He smiled warmly when he saw us and immediately stepped back from the doc, motioning us inside.

“Viktor’s still sleeping, but please come in,” he said.

“Has he been asleep this whole time?” I asked.

Ilya nodded. “I was out for two days straight. I kind of expect Viktor to sleep nger. He’s been carrying around so much grief for so many years that I think it might take him longer. We’ve been trying to get him to move past this for so many years and he wouldn’t do it.” He looked straight at me. “We didn’t know we just needed to give him orders,” he said, smiling.

“I did not give him orders,” I said, crossing my arms across my chest.

1/3

“No, that tracks, gazelle. I believe you gave him orders,” Misha sall, grinding

I glared at Misha for a moment, before turning back to Ilya. “How

you? You look much better than the last time I saw you”

“I feel much better. You were right when you told Vitya that it would’ve killed. I came here to say goodbye,” he said. As soon as he said the woods,

sat a low level for now I could feel his anger, but I immediately felt Ivan’s bubble go up around

“You take my hearing away when you put your bubble up, so you have to let me hen this way, “I told Ivan. He nodded discreetly, but kept his focus on

Ilva

everything you felt. That’s what happened when I shook your hand. I quite a lot. Maybe more than most. Between the grief and

“Ilya, I saw everything she did to you, everything she said to you, and I also don’t know how much Viktor has told you about me, about us, but I can hang

ling what you’ve been carrying around, it almost broke me. I don’t overwhelming sadness that your brother has been carrying around and then

said, I wild still see Ilya clearly, but I could only hear what Ivan heard while his break easily. What you were dealing with would’ve broken anyone,” bubble was up around me. Ilya was struggling with his memories. I put my hals in my pockets because the urge to comfort him was growing stronger. I glanced to Andrei, tapping my temple, then cutting my eyes toward Hya. He understood immediately.

“You have to stop blaming yourself, man. What you were dealing with wasn’t st any chick,” Andrei said after a quick snoop in Ilya’s head. “The more you keep blaming yourself, the more you think about how bad you got, the easier it will be for all that to come back to you. You’ll end up like Viktor You’ll carry that pain around for so long that you don’t know how to live witjut it,” he said.

“I can’t say we’ve all been there, but we all do things we regret at some poin Learn from it. Never let it happen again. And count yourself lucky you got away from this one. I didn’t see everything Sephie saw, but I saw what you looked like before Viktor fixed you. You got a second chance, man, Don’t waste it,” Misha said.

Ilya was chewing on his thumb nail as we talked, looking at the floor. He was geniet for a few minutes, then he looked up at all of us. A small smile crept across his face. “I can see why Vitya is so fond of all of you. I think he jaks about you guys more than he talks about me and Sasha. You’ve all been very good for him.”

On the elevator back to Adrik’s office, I asked Ivan if he felt anything before put his bubble up.

“You didn’t?” he asked me..

“No. I assume there was more darkness, but he said quite possibly the sadd est sentence ever spoken and I immediately felt your bubble, but nothing else. I’m either assuming that he’s got nerves of steel now or neither of our es went black during that conversation, too. He never reacted if they did,” I said.

“Ivan cuts you off from us, too,” Misha said. “I could feel you when we first go there, but then nothing until we left. I didn’t realize it was him until just now.”

“Same for me,” Andrei said.

I looked to Ivan. “I wonder if you can adjust it next time?”

He thought for a minute. “I’m sure there’s a way. I just have to figure it out.”

“But we do know it worked. I didn’t feel anything overwhelming from Ilya this time. I could tell he was still struggling when he’d think about it, but I felt nothing. Overall, I think he’s much better than the last time I saw him,” aid.

Before the doors to the elevator opened, Andrei stood in front of me as Misha picked me up so I could hitch a ride. “I did notice you had to put your hands in your pockets, gazelle. I was ready to smack your hand away, just in case,” he said, laughing.

“You have no idea how difficult that was for me,” I said, dramatically.

◆

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Sephie

Stephen walked out of Adrik’s office with his last meeting of the day just as we were walking up. He said quietly, in Russian, “I’ll be right back. Don’t start without me.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” I answered, giving him a wink while still on Andrei’s back.

Adrik was smiling when he saw me still hitching a ride on Andrei. “How did it go?” he asked. He visibly relaxed when he saw me smile at him.

“I almost had to karate chop her hands away to keep her from touching Ilya, but she managed to control herself,” Misha said, pretending to slice through the air. Adrik looked at me, his eyebrow raised, like he was deciding whether to be angry or amused. I hopped down from Andrei’s back and went to him.

“What? He’s still struggling when he has to talk about everything. I got the urge to comfort him,” I said. Adrik decided on angry, as his eyes switched to black. “I didn’t do it,” I said emphatically, as I wrapped my arms around his waist, unable to keep from laughing at his overprotective side.

Stephen walked back in a few moments later. He stopped briefly when he saw drik’s eyes, looking back to the office that was still full of people. He didn’t say a word, he just closed the door behind him. When he turned back to face us, he said, “villagers. I’m still a little jumpy about villagers.”

“We’ve confiscated the pitchforks. This is a pitchfork free zone. We should be fine, Yoden,” I said, smiling at him. My eyes switched to green, which made Adrik’s eyes go back to normal. Ivan’s too. He didn’t even know why his were changing, they were just there for support.

“I take it Viktor is still sleeping?” Adrik asked.

“Yeah, he’s been out this whole time. Ilya thought he might need longer than he did even,” Andrei said.

“And you said Ilya is still struggling?” Adrik asked, pulling me with him to one of the couches.

“Only when he talks about it, I think. He looks much better overall,” I said.

“Sephie was right, though, when she said it would’ve killed him if Viktor had fixed him. He told us he came here to say goodbye to Viktor,” Misha said. We heard Stephen curse under his breath.

This time, I felt the darkness creeping back in before I felt Adrik and Ivan send me their anger. It still surprised the Wonder Twins and Stephen, who all three looked at me when they felt it. I did get some enjoyment out of the looks on their faces as they tried to understand how I could operate with those levels of anger.

“See? Now I’m glad I closed the door. Could you imagine needing a signature for your expense report and walking in on that?” Stephen said pointing. to me, Adrik, and Ivan. I giggled as I pulled Adrik’s arms around me tighter.

Adrik looked to Ivan, “did that happen when you were with Ilya?”

“It started, but my idea worked. She didn’t feel anything from him. I cut her a from the Wonder Twins too, though. And apparently, I also cut her hearing off, but now she can listen through my head, which seemed perfectly formal to me at the time, but now sounds weird to say out loud.” Ivan said.

“Normal is relative anyway, Squish,” I said, grinning at him.

“It happened when Ilya told Sephie she was right and that he came to say goodbye, Same as just now,” Andrei said.

“That must be how the demons are getting in. It wears you down so much that you feel completely hopeless,” Stephen said.

“I think you might be right, Yoden. I do think he’s much better now, but I also think he’s still at risk of having it come back. Can you see if he shakes it off for good, Misha?” I asked.

He got his faraway look in his eye as he was checking possible outcomes. He looked back to me, saying, “he looks fine eventually. I think it’ll just take time.”

“I think he needs to hear what you and Bubba said to him about a million more times, too,” I said. I looked between the two of them, grinning. “It must be such a burden to be so incredibly handsome and so wise at the same time.”

“I mean, some days, yes. Most days, no,” Andrei said, cutting his eyes over at ne.

I could feel Adrik’s chest vibrate as he laughed quietly. He looked back at Ivan, asking, “did you mean to cut her off from those two or it just happened that way?”

“It’s always been that way. You’re the only one he’s never cut me off from,” I said. “But I think he might be able to adjust it next time. We should go check on him again tomorrow. We can experiment.” Ivan’s devious grin spread across his face as he agreed.

The next day was a weekend day, so all of us went to check on Ilya and Viktor Adrik wanted to see for himself how well Ivan’s bubble worked. “I guess I’ll see if that poor kid really does have nerves of steel now or if our eyes just didn’t change yesterday,” I said as we walked to Viktor’s door.

Ilya was happy to see us all again. He was even happier to see the food I brought him. “Vitya won’t shut up about your cooking. It’s a good thing our mother isn’t here. She’d be jealous,” he said, his warm smile on his face.

“He does look better than the last time we saw him,” Adrik thought as he watchel Ilya.

“I’m assuming Viktor is still dead to the world?” I asked.

“He woke up for a few minutes last night. He looked better, but he went right back to sleep and hasn’t woken up since,” he said.

I felt Adrik’s arm around my waist, pulling me gently, but firmly, against him saw Ivan catch his eye, too. “And how are you, Ilya? You look better than the last time I saw you,” he said.

Ilya smiled, but we could all see the struggle still behind his eyes. I felt Adrik grip on me get tighter and felt Ivan’s bubble go up immediately before Ilya even had a chance to answer.

“I’ll be your interpreter for the duration of this visit,” Ivan said to both me and drik. We could hear him laughing in his head, but his face was completely serious and he kept his focus on Ilya.

Ilya looked at Adrik, surprise was evident on his face. He took a step back, which let me know that our eyes had likely changed. Andrei glanced at us, noticing it too. “Don’t be worried, Ilya. You still have sonjething hanging around you. They can feel it. That’s going to keep happening until you finally get rid of it. It’s not directed at you. It’s directed at whatever is trying to break you down,” he said.

“It’s still alarming,” Ilya said, fear evident in his voice.

“Alarming is a nice way to put it, yes,” Stephen said, stepping closer to Ilya. But if you consider that they’re trying to help you by figuring out what the hell it is that’s hanging around you, then it’s much easier to stomach. The just have unique methods.” We all laughed at Stephen’s explanation, but it was Andrei who looked between Stephen and Ilya, with wide eyes.

“Is this the first time you’ve spoken in front of Ilya?” he asked Stephen..

“I think so, yes,” Stephen said, looking very confused.

Andrei looked back to me and Adrik, then to Ivan. “Boss, I think Stephen just literally made whatever it was leave. Ivan,” he said, indicating for Ivan to lower his bubble. “You both are really quick at catching it, so she’ll be fine if it comes back, but I want to see if she can feel the difference now.”

I felt Ivan’s bubble slowly retracting. Adrik kept a firm hold on my waist. I could feel both of them smoldering, just in case. I looked at Andrei, nodding once to let him know Ivan had removed his bubble. He then looked at Ilya and said, “Ilya, tell us again how you are since the last time Boss has seen you.”

This time, it was still evident that he was carrying things he was going to have to continue to work on, but the darkness was gone. Ilya hadn’t even spoken yet, but I could tell he felt it too. “You can tell too, can’t you? That heavy darkness that has been following you is gone now?” I asked him.

His eyes were as wide as they could possibly be as he looked at all of us. He stood up a little straighter, like he felt lighter. “I feel…better,” he said, like he still wasn’t quite sure. We watched as he took internal inventory of his body, then a wide smile stretched across his face. “Yeah. Definitely better.”

*Your mind didn’t immediately jump to your breakup this time. You thought about you for the first time since anyone has asked you that question,” Andrei said.

*Keep it that way, man. Whatever it was that was on you can still come back, but you have to let it. You’re in charge again. Which means you’re in charge of your own thoughts, too. Thinking about what just happened to you in any other context than trying to learn from it and heal from it will roll out the red carpet for it to come back,” Misha said.

Ilya’s wide smile spread across his face as he thanked all of us. We all watched as his light grew even brighter in front of us.

430

Adrik

As we walked back into the penthouse, Vitaliy and Aleksei greeted us. With ich day that passed, I grew more surprised that my father was still in the city. He'd never stayed more than three days since handing everything over to me. It was close to two months that he'd been here this time.

"You all look like something just happened," Vitaliy said as we walked in.

Sephie glanced at him, then at me. "I see where your observation skills come from," she said, her sweet smile across her face. "We just went to check on Viktor again. As it turns out, Stephen's mere presence was enough to make whatever has been on him leave."

"Not his presence, spider monkey. He was here the other night. It was when he spoke," Andrei corrected her.

"I know. But it sounds way more dramatic my way, so I'm sticking with that, she said, grinning at him.

"You had the same thing happen again that happened the other night, sladkay?" Vitaliy asked.

She shook her head no. "Nope, Ivan puts up a bubble around me. It couldn't in again. Both he and Adrik also feel it faster than I do now, so they burn it off right away."

"But Stephen made it leave?" he asked.

"Yeah, apparently I'm not warm and fuzzy enough for whatever was on him.was just trying to be helpful, but it was not appreciated," Stephen said, trying to come across as offended. We could all see his sly smile turning up one corner of his mouth though.

Vitaliy chuckled. I said, "we have been told that now that Stephen has his gift, the fear is going to increase from any demons we encounter. I'm still not convinced it was actually a demon that was on him, because Ivan couldn't see anything, but whatever it clearly knew who Stephen was. As soon as he spoke to Ilya, it left."

"How do you know?" Vitaliy asked.

"I could feel it," Andrei said. "I can't feel it the same way Sephie does, but I Enew it was there. As soon as Stephen started talking, it changed. It was like it got scared and then it was suddenly not there anymore."

I caught Sephie smiling at Andrei as he talked. It was obvious that she was proud of him and was enjoying watching him evolve and get better with his gift. He was quickly becoming much more confident. He stepped in right away the first night Ilya was here to help diffuse what could've been a very volatile situation. He also stood up to Viktor when his anger got the best of him. I'd never seen Andrei stand up to any of the other guys that way before. It was nice to see. He was stepping into his own.

"What about when Ivan put his bubble up this time? Did he cut her off from you two this time too?" I asked.

"It wasn't the same as last time," Misha said. "Last time, he cut her completely off. Like I couldn't feel anything. This time, I could feel her, it just wasn't as strong as it usually is."

"Same for me," Andrei said.

"Since I didn't experience the complete cutoff, I'm just going to agree here. Honestly, I didn't notice either way. I'm still trying to figure out the pancake paradox," Stephen said.

"What did you do differently, Squish?" Sephie asked, grinning at Stephen.

"Mostly just tried to include them in the bubble this time. I don't think they were all the way in, since they could hear everything going on like normal. Or else it doesn't affect their hearing the way it does yours," Ivan said.

"Does it affect your hearing as well?" Vitaliy asked me.

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I nodded. "It's harder to hear anything outside the bubble. I can still hear Ivan I can still hear Sephie. Everything else is very muffled. We can both hear through Ivan now though, so it doesn't matter," I said.

Stephen suddenly inhaled. "Because that's how Sephie prefers to read people. She has other ways, but her preferred method is to hear them speak. Ivan hides that, making her look like a normal human once again. Did your eyes change the first time you went to see Ilya?" Stephen asked Sephie.

"I don't think so. He didn't react to them that time, if they did," Sephie said.

"I don't think they did. The darkness from Ilya wasn't as strong the first time. She didn't even feel it that time. I'm still trying to figure out how I felt it before she did, to be honest," Ivan said.

"It was a threat to her. Makes sense you'd pick up on it quickly after that very first time when she couldn't handle it," Stephen said. "Andrei, if you could feel it, did you notice anything different once Ivan put his bubble around Sephie? Either time?"

"It backed off the first time. The second time, you made it leave soon after," Andrei said.

"And then a red panda on the other side of the universe got its pancake," Misha said, somehow managing to keep a straight face.

We all laughed, but Vitaliy just looked at Misha like he was quite possibly the dumbest person he'd ever met. Vitaliy looked back at me, a questioning look on his face. "Your men should not be sampling the product, son," he said seriously, which only served to make us laugh harder.

"Vitaliy, if you haven't figured out by now, most of the dumb s hit we all say orginated with me. It's my fault. Misha's still clean as a whistle," Sephie said, trying to gain control, but still having fits of laughter.

Vitaliy still didn't look as amused as the rest of us, instead choosing to steer the conversation to more serious matters. "And what of Armando? What are you doing with him?"

We all straightened up at the mention of Armando, the mood now as serious as Vitaliy. "He's still alive. Stephen is going to break him eventually." I
said.

"Why not kill him?" Vitaliy asked. He hadn't been present for the conversations about Stephen's gift and the ultimate outcome for the souls he would save by using it.

Sephie inhaled deeply. She crossed her arms across her chest and looked at Vitaliy, now without a trace of the humor and joy that were visible just a moment ago. "Because if Adrik kills him, that soul never learns the lesson it was trying to avoid by taking in the demon in the first place. It comes back, makes the same mistakes all over and more innocent people die in the next go around. If Stephen breaks him, that soul is locked in his body, with the demon, neither of them having control and both of them being tortured in ways we couldn't fathom until Armando's body dies. Armando is young. He's healthy. His body is going to live a very long life, meaning that so will endure a lifetime of torture and will never forget that lesson."

Vitaliy was looking down at his hands as she explained the reason to him. When he looked up at her, he looked surprised. Misha, who was standing in between them, could see her eyes and understood the meaning behind his look. "Purple means universal truth. That's the latest color to appear. No one wants to argue with the Universe, so Armando is up to Stephen to take care of," he said.

"When does this happen?" Vitaliy asked, still staring at Sephie's eyes.

She looked at Stephen, who looked back at her wide-eyed for a moment before regaining his expert control of his facial expressions. "You're absolutely right. I am feeling haughty after seeing Ilya. Vlad is making progress with customs. He'll be here soon. I'm going to need to show him my portfolio. I'm ready when you are."

Sephie laughed, then looked at me. "You're okay with Stephen breaking him she asked silently.

"Not really, but I won't stop it. Like Misha said, I'll argue with you. I'm not arguing with the Universe." I responded.

"Yoden, what do you think you need from me to make it happen?" Sephie asked Stephen.

"Bold of you to assume I'd know that answer," he said.

King of the Underworld

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 431

431

Adrik

Sephie could feel my anger starting to rise over talk of Armando. I still didn't want her to ever have to see him again. Everyone noticed my eyes go black, which then triggered Ivan and Sephie's eyes as well.

"We can find a way to make it all happen without Sephie being there. Maybe can be his battery instead of her," Andrei said, trying to keep me calm.

"That might work, actually," Ivan said. "We send everything to her, she sends it to Andrei, then Stephen uses him instead of her."

Sephie had walked to my side when she felt my anger coming on, trying to help me remain calm. "That could work," she said, chewing on her lip.

"What are you thinking, princess?" Ivan asked, silently. "You're not convinced."

"I don't know yet. Something doesn't feel right about that. It doesn't feel right about me helping Stephen either, for the record, so don't yell at me for trying to find a way to make that happen. I'm not," she responded. Ivan couldn't keep the laugh in. Everyone knew he was having another conversation with Sephie that they weren't privy to.

"She's trying to figure it out. She said something feels off about Andrei helping, but she said it also feels off if she helps. She told us not to yell at her," I said, kissing her temple.

Misha got his faraway look in his eye for a moment. He looked right at me when he came back to the present. "It needs to be you, Boss. I don't think Sephie needs to help at all, either. You've got enough "f u ck you" power when it comes to Armando that Stephen won't need anyone else." Sephie -looked at Misha as he was talking. His wide smile stretched across his face. "Sephie agrees," he said, pointing to her.

I turned her around so I could look at her. Her purple eyes were the first thing saw. "That settles that then," I said.

Stephen, who had been quiet for most of this conversation stood up and walked over to Sephie. "When you helped me with my sisters, I gave you all of my memories of them so you could give it back to them. Only I didn't know it was me, but whatever. I'm going to need you to do that with your memories of Armando. I don't have enough on my own to break him. I need your memories too." He looked at her seriously. "I need everything, Seph, which means you're going to have to uncover it one last time."

I could feel her starting to worry, but she was so far keeping it under control. "How did you package it up for me? And whenever I give it to you is when you're breaking Armando. You're not walking around with all of that for any longer than you have to," she said.

Stephen looked at me, raising an eyebrow. "We can do it now, if you want to. One less thing for me to worry about," I said.

He looked back to Sephie. "Think about taking everything, the memories, the Belings, even the way your body shakes in response to being alone now, and putting all of that into a container to give to me. I especially want you to concentrate on the fear you still struggle with containing. He needs to feel that. He needs to know that feeling intimately for the rest of his days." He was watching her as he was talking. I was fairly sure her eyes were swirling, as her emotions were all over the place and Stephen couldn't look away.

I turned her to face me, pulling her completely in front of me. Her hands immediately began to fidget with the buttons on my shirt. "We can do it whenever you're ready, love. It doesn't have to be now," I said softly. "Ivan and the Wonder Twins can stay with you up here and then I'll be right back. Somehow I don't think it's going to take long."

Her brow furrowed. I could feel her body literally disagreeing with me. "No, give him everything outside the room. I'm telling you, he doesn't need to hold on to this very long. They can stay with me outside the room, but I at least need to go that far. Ivan can put his bubble up and cut me off from hearing anything." I glanced to Misha, who confirmed what she'd just said.

She glanced back at Stephen. "Do you want to do it now?"

"No time like the present to go fumbling through the dark," Stephen said, grinning at her. She looked at everyone else, who were all in agreement to make it happen now.

"Do you want my hatred for Giana too? I mean, I want to make sure you have enough material," Misha asked, grinning at Stephen.

1/2

Outside the room where we kept Armando, Ivan told the guards to take a very long break, then cut the cameras off once they were gone. Sephie still felt nervous, but also determines). On the elevator down, I caught her silently talking to Andrei. They had a signal they gave each other to indicate the other should fish in their head. Once we were outside the room, she glanced at him, then looked at Stephen.

"Yoden, I'm really sorry for what I'm about to give you," she said. She looked at falters

me, then to Ivan. "If he there, do what you did with me the other night with Ilya. He might not, because he can handle cold much easier than I can, but just in case, you need to send him everything right away."

She looked at Stephen, saying, "if you do falter, it's going to come after you as last-ditch effort. Let them protect you the same way they would me. It's going to feel like you get hit with a wall of fire, but just remember to breathe."

She stepped away from me, taking Stephen's hand and puling him with her. She dropped his hand and took in a deep breath.

"Give me a second," she said, closing her eyes.

I could feel everything she was going through as she relived everything with mando. It was brief, but it was intense. All the fear, the betrayal, the heartbreak both for her and for Giana, the anger, she went through all of it trying to contain it to give it to Stephen. "I'm sorry," she said as she grabbed his hand.

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Stephen doubled over like someone had just suc ker punched him in the stomach, letting out something between a loud exhale and a groan. She didn't

go of his hand, trying to help him stay upright. I could see tears streaming down her face as she watched him feel everything she had felt. He sucked in a sharp breath, standing up. His face was red and his eyes were somewhat wild. It almost looked like his bloodlust was coming to the surface. It took him a moment of holding onto Sephie before he finally gained some of his composure back. He looked to Misha, saying, "I've got plenty, dude. We'll figure out what to do with your hatred for Giana later."

Sephie tried to smile, but it only made more tears fall. He looked back at her putting his hand on her cheek. "Don't worry, Seph. I can handle it. You shouldn't have to anymore," he said, kissing her forehead. He glanced at me and motioned toward the room where Armando was being kept.

Ivan walked to Sephie, wrapping his massive arms around her. I watched her hide her face in his chest as we closed the door behind us. Once she was out of sight, I let my anger take over. Stephen needed it to break Armando and I wanted Armando's last conscious moments to be nothing but terror as he looked at my black eyes.

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Adrik

Armando's eyes got wider as he took in the sight before him. Stephen was intimidating in his own right when his bloodlust took over. Then you add in me and I'm surprised Armando didn't p iss himself. I had been keeping him restrained, mostly just because I still had moments where I couldn't get the image of Sephie with her wrists tied behind her out of my head and I wanted him to know that discomfort as long as possible.

I would give him periodic breaks from it. Just when he got used to not being restrained, that's when I'd have him tied to the chair again for days on end. His memory had never been the best. I wanted to make sure he could easily remember the feeling.

Now, however, he was on a break. He was free to move away from us, but his fisir kept him firmly in place. He was frozen in the chair, his eyes shifting nervously from me to Stephen and back again. He opened his mouth to speak but nothing came out.

Stephen was staying remarkably calm, despite struggling with everything Seph had just given him. He walked closer to Armando, "Do you want to know what's about to happen?" he asked. Anytime Stephen would use psychology as a weapon, his voice got a certain tone to it. Almost like he was mocking the person, but in the most sinister way possible.

Armando kept looking between me and Stephen, which caused Stephen to glance back at me. "Oh, I know what you want to know first. You want to know why his eyes are black. Allow me to explain. You see, you made a deal with a demon. There's a very slight chance you might not have known you did, as intelligence was never your strongest attribute, but it was ultimately because you're so weak that you couldn't fight off the evil. Either way, you have a demon that's been riding you for years."

Armando kept looking at me while Stephen was talking. His eyes were pleading with me to save him as some part of him realized what was about to happen.

Stephen continued, "now you shouldn't feel too bad about being such weak stace that a demon got in. Happens to lots of people. Happened to Boss, as a matter of fact. The only difference is, Boss made his demon work for him. Which makes him infinitely more powerful than you'll ever be." Stephen paused to let Armando comprehend what he'd just said. "See, your soul tried to take the easy way out of life. It tried to s kip ahead quite a few levels, but it did so in the most evil way possible. It meant that innocent people had to die, which can't go unpunished. That's where I come in. My job is to make sure your soul spends the rest of your very long life learning to never, ever do that again. I'm going to make sure neither one of you leave that body until that body dies from very, very old age."

As Stephen was talking, I was watching Armando watching me. I couldn't see his demon, but I knew it was there. I could feel it. I could feel when it took over and stepped forward. Armando's eyes went black as well. If it caught Stephen off-guard, he didn't show it. Armando laughed. He looked at Stephen, his expression dripping with hatred. "You're not strong enough to do that," he said. "You don't have enough power to do that to me. You have no idea who I am."

Stephen was quiet for a minute, like he was having second thoughts. He crossed his arms across his chest, looking at Armando. He walked right in front of him, bending down so he was eye-level to him, saying, "why do you think I brought him too, dum bass?"

When Armando realized the full meaning of what Stephen had just said, he tried to quickly get away from Stephen. Stephen anticipated it and caught Armando by the throat, throwing him back down in the chair. "Did I say you uld leave?" he asked, his anger now clearly visible. Armando coughed a few times, trying to weigh his options.

Stephen stepped back from Armando. He glanced quickly at me, then looked back at Armando. "Just as a courtesy, I'm going to give you something to keep you in your seat before we get started," he said. I knew he was asking for my anger. I was more than happy to provide it.

Sephie had explained how she pushed her anger to Andrei and Misha when they fought Vitaliy's guys. She was right. It was more difficult to send to anyone other than her. My anger was a complete raging inferno but I saw Stephen's sly grin turn up one side of his mouth when he felt it.

I watched as Armando's eyes changed back to normal and a look of horror cane over his face. He was seeing something I couldn't see. I wasn't sure if Stephen could see it or not, but much like Stephen's sisters, Armando was frozen in place. His hands gripped the arms of the chair he was in, like he was on the edge of a cliff trying to save himself. His knuckles turned white. Every muscle in his body tensed as he was trying to not see what was being shown to him.

Stephen took a deep breath, looking back to me once more. "That was just the warm-up. Keep it coming. It's clearly working," he said.

I cranked up the inferno as high as it would go and concentrated on pushing it all to Stephen. I always wondered if there was a limit to my anger. Would I ever hit the end of it? Would it run out? Judging by what I was feeling at the moment, that answer was very clearly no. The more I concentrated on keeping my anger as high as possible, the more it responded and the hotter it burned.

Stephen turned back to Armando. One last time, we saw his eyes go black as his demon tried to think of a way out, but his body wasn't responding to its demands. There was already a clear disconnect between Armando's soul and his body. The demon was powerless. Stephen hit him with more memories from Sephie and Armando let out a blood-curdling scream. It was the last sound he made.

As Stephen gave everything back to Armando that he'd done to Sephie, I could clearly see the light behind his eyes go out. There was nobody home any longer.

Stephen turned back to me after a few moments. "It's done," he said, almost like he was surprised it had worked.

Surprisingly, my anger dissipated easily. Almost instantly, even. Stephen caught my look of surprise and laughed. "I'm as surprised as you that all that went away so quickly," he said. "You've never been so angry before. I could've broken ten Armando's and you still would've had plenty leftover."

"Yeah, that was different," I said. "What about you? You good? You gave it all to him? Nothing leftover?"

He looked at me, with wide eyes. He stepped closer so he could talk quietly. Before he spoke he tapped his temple, like he was asking if anyone else was listening in. "Just us," I said.

"Boss, I don't know how she's been walking around with all of that. She gave nie everything from the attack on her and Misha, to the ball, to the first kidnapping attempt, and then everything from the second. Just the pain alone from when she was hurt was enough to break him, not to mention everything she felt on top of that. Much like your anger, I could've broken ten Armando's and still had leftover. He's never getting away from all of that for the rest of his days," he said, somewhat satisfied,

I put my hand on his shoulder, pushing him toward the door. "You did good, kid. I'm proud of you."

As he opened the door, he said, "you know, I'm proud of me too. I can finally use my hatred for people to do some good in this world."

Sephie, who still had her face hidden in Ivan's chest heard him and giggled. $he didn't turn around immediately and now that my anger had dissipated, I could feel her emotional turmoil. Ivan kept his arms around her, lightly rubbing her back with his thumbs/

"How did it go?" Andrei asked.

"Not as violently as I was expecting. His demon underestimated me, so there wasn't as much fighting back as I was hoping for, which is slightly disappointing," Stephen said.

Sephie sighed and went to turn around, which made Ivan loosen his grip on her. She still looked troubled, but she was curious. "It worked to use Adrik?" she asked..

"Yeah, he's all the battery I would ever need. Dude's got fire for days," he said. As he answered her, I was hit with her warmth. Her smile stretched across her face and she walked quickly to me.

"It was harder to send it to him versus you at first, but it worked. It got easier the longer I did it," I said, kissing her temple.

"He also turned it off immediately when we were done. Not gonna lie, I was worried about that in the moment. I've never seen him so angry and be able to turn it off like that," Stephen said.

Sephie wrapped her arms around my waist. "You're finally learning how useful of a tool it is," she said as she hid her face in my shoulder.

I looked at Ivan, asking. "she didn't hear anything?" He shook his head no at the same time that she did. "Come. Let us be gone from this place," I said, pulling Sephie with me.

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Adrik

Sephie stayed quiet the rest of the evening, but she felt happy. I caught Stepbe away from everyone else while Misha was distracting Sephie. “When you gave everything to your sisters, what did it do to you?” I asked.

“I was crazy tired that next day, but otherwise felt much better. She’ll feel better soon. I’ve known that she feels things intensely for a long time, but knowing it and feeling just how intensely she feels things are two very different things. She’s probably going to need to sleep most of the day tomorrow,” he said.

“What about you? Are you extra tired after doing that again?”

He thought for a moment. “No, actually I feel really good. I think it’s leftover from your f uck you boost,” he said, laughing quietly.

“Good. That also means you’re getting better at handling the extra. It’s a good sign. Likely means you’re going to level up soon.”

He thought for a moment. “I have no idea how my gift would level up. Do I to choose? Can I literally rip the demon out of the person and crush it next time? I’d sign up for that.”

I looked at him, trying not to laugh at where his mind went. “This break from time with him. It’s really increased your creativity. I have contacts at customs
lad has been good for you. I think you were spending a little too much might delay him a little longer.”

Stephen was normally very understated. He would laugh, but he was always gulet about it. It was a rare occasion when we could get him to laugh foudly, especially in a group setting. He laughed so loudly that everyone else stopped talking and looked at him, completely surprised that he’d done
50.

Sephie’s wide smile stretched across her face. I knew she’d fished in my head to find out what made him laugh. For a moment, she looked brighter. I was hopeful after some extra rest she could continue to look brighter.

That night, once we were alone, I asked her about her and Andrei’s method of talking to each other. “Me and Ivan aren’t the only ones you can talk to without actually speaking,” I said, grinning at her.

She cut her eyes over at me. “How did you know?”

“I saw your signal to each other. You’re very discreet. I don’t think anyone else has caught on,” I said. “What did you need to tell him?”

“I asked him to keep an eye on Stephen. I was worried about his confidence. I wasn’t sure how strong Armando’s demon would be and I wasn’t sure if you’d be able to feel if he started to hesitate about his abilities. I was trying to cover all the bases,” she said, climbing into bed while she waited for
me.

I turned off the light and grabbed the remote for the blinds, closing them part way before climbing in beside her. “I don’t know if it will always remain so, but his confidence was definitely not an issue this time. We saw the demon step forward. It grossly underestimated Stephen,” I said. I opened my arms for her to lie across my chest. She sighed and snuggled in as close to me as possible. I knew it wouldn’t take her long to fall asleep. “How are you, solnishko? You’ve been quieter than usual.”

“I’m really tired, but I think I’m okay. Kinda feels like what I would imagine hangover feels like,” she said.

I laughed. “You’ve never had a hangover?” I asked, surprised.

“I’ve never had alcohol,” she said quietly. “I saw the worst of it and the supposed good side of it didn’t seem worth it to me.”

I held her a little tighter. “You’re not missing anything at all. I love you a little more because of it.”

Her soft laugh was the last thing I heard before she quickly fell asleep.

I woke quite late the next morning. Sephie was still in her favorite spot across my chest, sound asleep. She was mumbling quietly, but her fingers were
playing lightly on my chest. She felt like she was still happily steeping. I ran my hands through her hair, which still cwierd her to make bey DANAY cooing noises and snuggle in to me closer.

I watched her sleep for a little longer, then finally decided to get up. It was close to noon, which never happened for me. Maybe I used a little more energy than I thought last night.

“Boss, you two okay? Did you get capped again?” I heard Ivan asking after I had been up for a few minutes.

“Apparently so. She’s still sleeping. Stephen said it made him really tired after he broke his sisters, so he expected Sephte to sleep later today,” I told him. I walked back to the bed to check to see if she was shaking yet and she wasn’t for the first time since her and Ivan were taken, she was sleeping on bet own without shaking. “I think he fixed her shaking problem. I got out of bed a few minutes ago and it hasn’t started yet.”

“That’s impressive. That hasn’t happened since she and I were grobbed. Although Andrel’s going to be really disappointed. I think he looked forward to extra naps.”

“We’ll see if it sticks before we tell him, “I said, laughing. “Has anyone seen Vikrur yet?”

“Yeah, he’s awake now. He and Ilya came upstairs not too long ago. When you tap didn’t wake up, we moved back downstairs. Let us know when the princess wakes up. Viktor wants to see her,” he said.

“Will do. I half expect her to wake up soon just because she can tell he’s awake now.”

I climbed back in bed with her, pulling her back on my chest. She moaned softly and I felt her start to stir. I ran my hand over her scarred back, letting my fingers trace along her scars. She’d told me that her scars were mostly numb because of the extensive damage, but when I traced my fingers along them, she could feel it. She said she liked it when I did it, as it made her back feel more like normal because she could actually feel something

“Good morning,” she said, her voice hoase from sleep. She didn’t pick her head up to look at me. I could feel she was still tired.

“How do you feel? You’re still tired,” I asked. I felt her nod her head against iny chest.

“You’re the one that did everything and I’m the one that’s exhausted. It doesn’t make sense,” she said, pressing her body, closer to mine.

“You still had to unpack everything for Stephen, which meant you had to go through it again. Even if it was brief, you still had to do it. But I do think it might’ve fixed you not being able to sleep by yourself. I was out of bed for several minutes and you never started shaking,” I told her.

“Really?” she asked. She finally picked her head up to look at me. She was definitely still tired.

“Yeah, I was just as surprised as you,” I said, grinning at her still sleepy eyes. I moved her hair out of her face as she rested her chin on my chest. My fingers traced lightly over her face, which caused her to close her eyes. She had a small smile on her face as she enjoyed my touch.

She was quiet for long enough that I was beginning to wonder if she fell back sleep again, but she asked, “has anybody seen Viktor yet?”

“Yeah, Ivan said he’s awake now. He and Ilya showed up a little while ago, but they moved back downstairs when we didn’t wake up.”

She sighed. “Guess I should get up then.” I could feel her reluctance to move and couldn’t keep from laughing at her. “You don’t have to, solnishko. You’re clearly still tired.”

“I am still tired. But I want to check on Yoden. And I would like to not feel awkward about Viktor again, so I need to get that out of the way, even though I’m happy to just keep avoiding it for a while longer,” she said. She sounded almost irritated when she brought up Viktor, which had never happened before.

“You can avoid him for as long as you like. You’ve never once been irritated with any of them, but you’re clearly irritated with him.”

She sighed again. “I know. I shouldn’t be though. I think being irritated with hon is easier than admitting I’m hurt he spent so much energy avoiding me,” she said. She’d closed her eyes again, but it didn’t stop the tears from escaping down her cheeks. My breath caught as I felt her sadness. It was at least her sadness this time and it wasn’t nearly as oppressive as what she’d felt from him, but I found it made me angry that she was feeling it. She felt the shift in my mood and opened her eyes. They switched from amber to black as soon as she looked
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at me. She searched my eyes, a small smile on her face. “I know it’s not Viktor’s fault, but I do love that you’re even willing to kick his a ss for me.”

“Not just me. They’re all willing to kick his a ss over losing his temper with you. I don’t envy the position he’s in right now. It’s going to take some time for him to make it up to everyone.”

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Sephie

“Where are you guys? I asked Ivan once Adrik and I were amongst the living once more.

“We’re all in my apartment, princess. How are you? Still tired. I can feel you’re still tired,” he responded.

“Yeah, I told Adrik last night I knew what a hangover was like, this was probably it. How’s Viktor?”

“He’s a lot better. He wants to see you. He knows he has making up to do. Are you guys up now? Want us to come up?”

“No, I want a change of scenery for once. At least until it’s time for dinner. How’s Stephen? He’s okay to you? He feels f ucking fantastic to me, if I’m being
honest.”

I heard Ivan laughing. “He is f ucking fantastic, princess. I don’t know if he’s still ugh off Boss’s anger or what, but he’s the happiest I’ve ever seen him. It’s really good to see. That kid deserves it.”

“Yeah, he does. Okay, be down in a minute. Now that I’m assured Stephen will be able to make me laugh, in only the way that he can, I’m more willing to face Viktor.”

“Don’t worry, princess. He knows he hurt you. He’ll try to make it right, but I cant say I would be disappointed if you ripped him a new one in front of everyone for being an as shole.”

I giggled. “You’ve been spending too much time with Stephen. Stop enabling me.

We didn’t have to knock on Ivan’s door. Just as I was about to, Misha opened the door, his handsome wide smile across his face. His smile grew larger when he saw the surprise on my face.

“Something happened. We’re still trying to figure out what happened, but we could feel both of you when you got off the elevator. We all knew you were coming,” he said as he closed the door behind us.

“You can feel him too?” I asked, glancing back at Adrik.

“Yeah, much like we can feel you now, but he’s quieter. For me at least,” Misha said.

I glanced at Andrei to see if the same was true for him. He agreed with Misha. I think because I’m like you, I’ve always picked up on everyone a little more than the rest of us. It’s stronger for me now, just because I think I’ve been noticing it longer. But it’s stronger for everyone, not just Boss.”

Stephen said, “since I’m still in my pancake paradox infancy, I still can’t detect the subtle nuance, but I do feel like I might’ve gotten high off the supply, if you will. Like, I was seriously considering asking Misha if he wanted to go for a run this morning because I feel f ucking fantastic. Boss, if you feel like this every day, I’m going to need some of your secrets. Do you juice Keto? Are you doing yoga and not telling anyone else? Meditation in the mornings? Are you the real vampire among us and we just never noticed? Blood bags or live donors? I’m gonna need specifics.”

I looked at Ivan, who very clearly had a “told you” look on his face. Adrik laughed quietly as he pulled me back against him.

I grinned at Stephen, saying, “can we just all agree to always refer to everything weird that’s happening to us as the pancake paradox from now on? There will be legends created about us as a result. In the future, children will to longer be forced to learn calculus in school. Instead, they’ll learn about the pancake paradox and what happens when souls get ejected from bodies. The red panda population will thrive. Earth will be at peace.”

“What if that’s the key to peace all along? Red pandas,” Misha said, thoughtfully.

“Right now, red pandas are pancake-less and look at the state of the world,” foldrei said,

“Don’t worry. I’ve got a plan for mass production. We’re going to be just fine Stephen said, chuckling-

Once the laughter mostly died down from our ridiculous conversation, I finally looked at Viktor. “How are you, Papa Bear? You look better. Do you feel
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better?”

Adrik held me tighter against him. I could also feel the pull in my chest that meant he was thinking about how much he loved me. I knew he was trying to help me deal with the situation.

“I do, sestrichka. I feel much better. I actually didn’t realize how heavy everything that I was carrying around was becoming until it was gone. I feel bad that you had to carry it around with you,” he said, looking apologetic.

“Like everything. I think it was for a reason. It helped us figure out how to get whatever was following Ilya off him for good,” I said.

I glanced at Ilya, asking. “you’re still good? It hasn’t come back?”

He smiled warmly at me. He really did seem like a very sweet boy. He was handsome, like Viktor, but with a splash of boyish charm and innocence. While Viktor had very dark hair and darker features, Ilya’s hair was more of arty blonde. His eyes were a lighter brown than Viktor’s normally dark brown. He was Viktor-lite. “It hasn’t come back. I have an idea of what it was, though,” he said.

“You do?” I asked. All the guys looked at him, now curious as well.

“Yeah. Since Vitya was sleeping, I had nothing to do so I started researching spent a little time in Japan when I was in the military. They have demons that are specific to suicide – Shinigami. These demons follow you around and keep whispering to you until you finally lose hope and commit suicide,” Ilya said. He glanced at Viktor, almost like he was nervous, but he continued. “It’s common for them to affect entire family lines. Once they’re on one member of the family, they hop to other members of the same family

“I could believe that. Viktor’s oppressive sadness was probably the warm-up. They might’ve tried to get to him already, but he was too strong, so they jumped to you,” I said, chewing on my lip. “Or do you think the chick you were with is what gave it to you?” I asked Ilya.

“No idea. This is all very new to me,” he said.

“It doesn’t explain why Ivan couldn’t see it, either,” Stephen said.

Ivan had gotten up and grabbed his computer when Ilya first started talking. He was quietly reading through whatever he’d found. He looked up at me first, then to Stephen. “Actually, it does.”

“Explain please,” I said. “But don’t worry about the flavor of syrup for the pancakes. We’ll decide that later.”

He looked at me, trying not to smile, and just shook his head. “From the extensive two-minute search I just completed and what Ilya just said, these demons whisper to people, meaning they’re not fully attached to the people. not sure they’re trying to take over, even. It just seems like they’re very specific to suicide. So far, I’m only able to see demons when they’re actively trying to get in or when they already have gotten in. That’s why I couldn’t see this one.” He looked at Andrei, asking, “what did it feel like to you? Is it the first one you’ve felt like that?”

“It was cold, mostly, but quiet. Until Stephen spoke and then it got scared,” Andrei said. “It’s one of the first times that I’ve noticed a demon, so I don’t have a ton to compare it to. The lady that Battista brought with him she felt different. More similar to you three.”

I knew my eyes had turned black, because I could see Ivan’s switch immediately. I didn’t need to look to know that Adrik’s had done the same. My anger made an unexpected appearance at Andrei comparing me, in any way, that woman.

He looked at me, realizing what had happened. “I don’t mean you’re like her, spider monkey,” he said, trying not to laugh. “She felt hot. Same as you three. Anytime your demons come forward, it’s always associated with anger. There’s heat and fire there. What was on Ilya was the opposite. Quiet, but very cold. Now put your demon eyes away before Ilya has to change his puts.”

Ilya cursed under his breath. “How does that not scare the s hit out of you,” He said quietly, to no one in particular.

“Oh, don’t worry. As long as it wasn’t you that p issed them off, you have nothing to worry about,” Stephen said. “Although, now that I think about it, I might retract my request for red to be the next color your eyes come up with m not entirely convinced I’d be able to handle that. It’s disturbing enough on Vlad.”

Ilya cursed a little louder this time, looking at Viktor with wide eyes, which used all of us to laugh. Viktor said quietly, “it’s a joke. Sephie said. Stephen was a vampire because he’s so much colder than the rest of us. They both ran with it. Vitaliy still hasn’t figured out we’re talking about Vlad Tepes, so don’t ruin it.” Ilya was visibly relieved.

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“I love how we just had a serious conversation about Japanese suicide demons like it was a normal brunch discussion, but the possibility of red eyes was a step too far,” Stephen said, laughing.

“Ilva’s only seen the black. He hasn’t seen them change otherwise. It’s a little difficult to fathom,” I said, trying to stick up for Ilya who really had no clue of the high strangeness that was our little family.

“They do other things?” Ilya asked, now curious.

Sephte

“Yeah, dude. Go over there. She’ll show you,” Misha said.

Ilya looked at him like he was sure it was a trap. He looked at Viktor, who laughed his deep belly laugh. “He’s not trying to trap you. Her eyes change 1 colors depending on the emotion she’s feeling. Go look. It’s pretty fascinating, he said.

Ilya still looked uncertain, but he got up and walked closer to me. Adrik was still behind me, but I could see Ivan. His eyes were still black, which meant mine were too. I closed my eyes, thinking of how much I loved Adrik. When I opened my eyes, Ilya was standing in front of me. I looked at him with my blue eyes. He looked relieved that they weren’t black again.

“Blue means she’s thinking about how much she loves me,” Adrik said.

“You didn’t even look at her. How do you know her eyes are blue right now?” ya asked.

“I can feel everything she feels,” Adrik said.

“That’s why he was so quick to react when I first touched you. He felt what it did to me right away. He doesn’t usually try to make people’s lives flash before their eyes so quickly,” I said.

“Green means she’s being a sarcastic s hit,” Adrik said, lovingly, I grinned at ya’s surprised expression.

“You don’t have to show him the other ones, gazelle,” Misha said. He looked at Ilya, saying, “they turn amber when she’s sad and white when she’s scared. All of us feel what she feels and those two are very strong and I’d just rather not right now.”

“They turn white?” Ilya asked.

“Yeah, if you think her demon eyes are scary, then you’re not ready to see that Stephen said.

Ilya looked between Adrik and Ivan. “Can your eyes also do the same, then?”

“Yeah, that reminds me. How can yours turn black but not change like hers de Viktor asked.

“Are you ready for this, Viktor? Because I’m not sure you’re ready for this. But at least you’re already sitting down,” Stephen said. He looked very seriously at Viktor. “They control their demons.”

Viktor’s brow furrowed as he tried to understand what Stephen had just told him. “Your black eyes are your demons?” he asked.

I nodded. “I told Ivan not very long after I met you all that the best way to defeat your demons was to make friends with them. They have no power over you that way. At the time, I was just trying to help him cope. I didn’t know I was being serious. I would’ve told you the same thing if you hadn’t spent so much time avoiding me,” I said, crossing my arms across my chest. ould feel Viktor flinch from the blow. It came out a little harsher than 1 was intending, but I was still very irritated with him.

“I know, sestrichka. I knew you were going to make me deal with everything and I didn’t think I was ready,” Viktor said.

“If it makes you feel any better, me and Sasha have been trying to get him to deal with it for years as well. He wouldn’t listen to us either,” Ilya said.

“He wasn’t actively avoiding you, though. He’s been actively avoiding me for weeks, if not months,” I said.

Viktor stood up, walking to me. “I was actively avoiding you and I am very sony, Sephie,” he said, opening his arms to me. I glared at him for a moment, not moving, but finally gave in and went to him. He wrapped his arres around me, picking me up off the floor. He whispered so only I could hear, “I know you’re not mad. I know you’re hurt. I can feel you’re hurt. It will never happen again.” He held me for a few minutes. I could feel his turmoil. I knew he was sorry.

I finally sighed. “I know why you did it. It doesn’t mean I have to like it, but understand.”

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King of the Undel wolld

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Sephie

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1 finally sighed. “I know why you did it. It doesn’t mean I have to like it, but understand.”

He laughed softly as he put me down again. I felt Adrik’s arm around my waist, pulling me back against him. I could tell he was looking at Viktor over the top of my head. “Have you decided, Viktor? In or out?” he asked.

“All in, Boss. Sephie was right. I needed to fix myself first. I couldn’t have handled everything otherwise. They told me what happened with Armando last night. The guards that are on him said he just sits there, completely zoned out. If they make him move, he can move on his own, but only if they guide him. I think we should find somewhere to send him. Then none of us ever have to see him again,” he said,

“Give him a fake identity. No one will ever find him or know what happened to him,” I said to Adrik,

I felt him squeeze me just a little tighter. “Work on getting him set up with a new identity. I want his name, all of his names, erased from history.”

Adrik said.

“Can I pretend to be his brother when we take him? Not gonna lie, that would give me so much satisfaction to drop his a ss off at a nursing home, knowing he’ll never leave,” Stephen said.

Adrik and I both laughed. “I think that should definitely happen,” I said.

Does anyone know if there’s anything he particularly hates?” Ivan asked.

“Women who don’t know when to keep their mouths shut. He was not a fan of that,” I said, cringing at the memory. Adrik wrapped both arms around me, leaning down to press his cheek to mine.

Stephen’s face lit up. “YES! We’ll have him put in a room with the chattiest woman there.”

“Do we still have his safes?” I asked Ivan.

“We do still have his safes. We should open those before we send him away,” an said.

“You should do that now because I suddenly really want to know what’s in them,” I said. “I’ll start dinner. You guys go find that answer.”

Adrik chose to come upstairs with me instead of finding the answer to what was in Armando’s safes. Once we were alone; he pulled me in front of him, looking thoughtfully at me. “Some better now?” he asked.

“Better. I’m still slightly irritated, but better,” I said.

He chuckled. “You’re extra cute when you’re irritated.” His sex y smirk on his face, he leaned down and pressed his lips to mine..

“I shouldn’t be irritated still. There’s a very big discrepancy in how connected am with the other guys versus Viktor now. It’s like a constant reminder that I can’t get away from,” I said.

“I can order him to spend time with you,” Adrik said, playing with the curls amund my face.

“I don’t know if that will make it better though. It should fix itself, but in the meantime, I’m going to be irritated about it,” I said, pursing my lips. together.

Adrik laughed. “Extra cute.”

Vitaliy walked in the penthouse, without Aleksei. He was just as surprised that it was only me and Adrik as we were that it was only him.

“Where’s Alyosha?” I asked.

He had a sly grin on his face. “At his favorite restaurant. Turns out his favorite waitress still works there,” he said.

“That dog,” I said, laughing.

“Where are your men?” he asked Adrik.

“We have two safes from Armando’s house that require his retinal scan and fingerprint to get into. They’ve gone to open them before we send him a home,” he said.

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“Where is Armando’s house?” Vitaliy asked. I could already see the wheels thing in his head. I was fairly certain I could see what he was going to ask next. Adrik told him where the house was. Vitaliy asked, “and it’s just empty now? No one is there?”

“It’s completely empty. Martin cleaned him out. Why? Do you want it?” Adrik isked

Vitaliy nodded. “You two need your house back. You’ve been very gracious to let me stay here this long. I’ve decided to stay in the city a little longer 1
don’t want to be a trouble.”

“You’re no trouble, old man,” I said. “You’re only allowed to take Armando’s house if you promise that you and Alyosha will come for dinner regularly.”

He smiled widely at me. “I could never refuse such an offer.”

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Sephie

Armando had kept one safe completely filled with cash. The other also had cash in it, but had even more files. He kept detailed files on everyone. Disturbingly detailed files.

Ivan put down one file in front of Adrik when they came back upstairs. “There’s hundreds more files just like that one in that safe,” he said.

Adrik flipped through the file, his jaw clenching as he turned each page. I could feel him trying to keep his anger in check with each page he turned. My curiosity got the best of me. I walked to his side, looking at the information. It was a file on me. There were pictures of me outside the restaurant I used to work at, outside my apartment, taking Ms. Jackson to the grocery store He had all the details of my life before I met Adrik.

It didn’t make sense. Adrik got frustrated and closed the file. I stepped to the side and looked at it once more. “It looks like he hired a private investigator to find out what he could on me. No idea why he would need to know anything about me, but here we are.” I kept flipping through the information. “There’s nothing in here about me before I started working at the restaurant. If they were trying to find something they could blackmail me or control me with, they didn’t look hard enough. I can’t think of another reason why they would need that information.” We all stood in silence for a few moments, trying to come up with reasons.

It was Vitaliy that broke the silence. “You said he wanted to sell you when they took you?” I nodded. “He was seeing how easy it would be to make you disappear. It’s what they commonly do, especially for girls they think they can get substantial money for. They take the girls with no families. No one comes looking. He must’ve been planning to sell you for a lot longer than anste realized.”

“Yep, I’m gonna need a minute,” I said, walking quickly to the nearest bathroom. I could feel the bile rising in my throat as my need to vomit grew stronger. I emptied the contents of my stomach into the toilet, groaning after several minutes of retching.

Adrik’s warm hand was on my back. “You’re okay, solnishko,” he said, handing me a towel after I washed my mouth out and splashed water on my face. He kept his arms around me, standing behind me. My emotions were completely out of control.

“That means that if you hadn’t come to the meeting that night, I would’ve been kidnapped and sold,” I said, realizing the full gravity of the situation. I thought my stomach was empty. It was not. I leaned over the toilet, once again ridding my stomach of all of its contents. This time, when I stood up and looked at Adrik, I could see the look of surprise that meant my eyes had done something unexpected.

“You don’t feel scared right now,” he said, looking at my eyes. He looked closer, inhaling sharply. He said, “they’re not the normal white anymore. This one is different.” He pointed to the mirror to get me to look. “What were you thinking about? Only that they could’ve gotten to you if I hadn’t been at that meeting?” he asked as I looked at my eyes in the mirror.

He was right. It was different. Before, anytime they went white, there was still a hint of blue around my pupils and the outside of my iris. This time, the areas that were blue were now closer to black, making the white stand out even more.

I looked at Adrik, who was behind me, in the mirror. “It wasn’t just what would’ve happened if you hadn’t come to that meeting. It was also about how much I wanted to make Sal pay for even considering he could do that to me.”

Adrik smirked at me, taking my hand. “Keep thinking about that for a minute h ore,” he said, leading me back to the kitchen. The guys were confused at Adrik’s expression when we came back out. “New color. Look,” he said, pulling me in front of him so the guys could see.

“Whoa. That’s slightly easier to take than the normal white though,” Misha said.

“What were you thinking about to make this one happen, spider monkey?” Andrei asked.

Adrik chuckled. “Revenge.”

The guys couldn’t hide their smiles when Adrik told them. Misha looked at me, his wide smile across his face. “Gazelle, I keep thinking I couldn’t possibly love you any more and you prove me wrong each time. I love you so much right now,” he said, wrapping his arms around me and picking me up in a bear hug. I couldn’t help but laugh.

As he set me down, I said, “if you guys hadn’t shown up to that meeting, I would’ve been kidnapped and sold. I’m gonna make Sal pay for thinking he
could do that to me.”

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Vitaliy laughed. “You were made for my son, sladkaya. You couldn’t be any more perfect. Truly.”

“Who else does Armando have files on? Who wants to bet that Sal has the same thing in his house? Has anybody checked that place since be left?” I asked.

“Nobody went to his house. He still has his security there. We all know Armarido never took his security seriously,” Viktor said.

“How could he? He was too busy spending money on private investigators to follow me around,” I said, my anger clearly coming out, causing everyone to laugh.

“See, Ilya? The black eyes aren’t always intimidating. Sometimes they make her extra funny, Stephen said. Ilya laughed quietly, still not completely convinced there was nothing to worry about.

“We didn’t take the time to look through all the files. Yours was near the top Ivan said.

“At least I won’t have to fund his time in the home. He can fund himself. The cash that’s in those safes should be plenty to cover the expenses. We can find him a very chatty roommate to keep him company,” Adrik said.

“I think Vitaliy should take pictures at his house and send them to him. Give him something to look at,” I said. “Do you like Naples, Vitaliy? He has another house there. Lots of artwork in that one, too. Unless a certain someor has taken it all by now, in which case, good for her.”

“You’re taking Armando’s house, Vitaliy?” Ivan asked.

“Da. I’ve decided to stay in the city a little longer. I need a place. You guys mate it too easy for my men. They’re all getting soft staying here,” he said.

“If you need someone to help you furnish it, take Sephie. She LOVES shopping Misha said, laughing.

“Do not listen to him, Vitaliy. He for some reason hates me right now,” I said, glaring at Misha.

Vitaliy laughed. “Don’t worry, sladkaya. I know you better than you might think,” he said, winking at me.

The following morning, we were all in the gym. Stephen still felt insanely good. He walked up to both me and Misha as everyone was finishing up. asking. “I know you guys haven’t run in the city since you two were attacked, but what if we both go with her?” Misha looked at me. “Do you think your lung is up to trying that now? We can go really short the first time.”

“Yes, please go really short. I know I’m going to regret bringing this up.” Stephen said.

I thought for a minute. Ivan and Adrik had both been listening to the conversation. I wasn’t going if they weren’t okay with it. “If I take both of them, do you two feel okay with me going?” I asked both Adrik and Ivan.

They were both quiet for a moment, contemplating. Viktor had also been watching and listening. He walked up with Ilya, after having a quick conversation with him. “Take Ilya, too. He likes to run. He can keep up.”

1 looked back at Adrik and Ivan. They both conceded. “Keep it short and stay diese to the building. I’m more worried about your lung than I am anything else,” Adrik told me.

“I know. Me too,*1 responded.

I looked at Stephen and Ilya. “I feel like you guys are going to grow to hate me if this becomes a regular thing, but let’s go.”

Adrik caught Misha before we left, quietly telling him to keep an eye on my breathing. “She hasn’t done it in a while, but she starts to panic if she can’t catch her breath. Get her back here immediately if that happens,” he said,

“Don’t worry, Boss. I’m only letting her go around the block this time,” Misha said. He jogged toward the elevator to catch up to the rest of us.

“You’re very bossy. But I love you for it,” I told Adrik before we left. I could feel him trying not to worry about me as the doors to the elevator closed.

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Aepthle

Misha Inobed at me as steenk ne var formandy-

dealing with Roies, ham, and Ander If anmuthing

auto piting sinnend the Ninek the time

I laughed. “I’m not dealing with them elfter I don’t want in fark this up tik gang te sedie when call me giselle short we’re dies.

Threext Gazelle Ever I said printing to myself.

We set off around the binck, with Miche nn nne eldest me, Stephon on the chin, and Bya behind at Miña war still dightly paranoid afisat commarma being able to get to us. He mustard in like un report, but I could feel his week, the war albeavis mess of kle zoomoonidings, her aven jogged around the block

Both Bys and Stephen were quiet at se ran. Stephen kept pin

worried about dialing on. The were back at the bolding it undere

twenty minutes. Once we slowed to a walk, Micho put his arm around my shaq iders, cheeking on

day.” ↑ said, in Rizorians.

Tiva was surprised. “You can speal Russian, too? You’re American?” he asked, al most like he had gotten it wrong.

I glanced behind me, laughing at his surprised expression. “You’re Russian and yet you speak English * 1 said, grinning at him.

He laughed “Fair enough,” he said.

They escorted me to the penthouse, before going back to their own apartments. Adrik was visibly relieved when I walked in smiling. “How did The asked.

“It was good. I think my lùng might be finally back to normal. I didn’t strupde to catch my breath at all,” I said, I could see where his mind immediately went when he learned I didn’t struggle to catch my breath. “You shouldn’t be too surprised. It’s been getting better with you,” 1 salil, pushing my warmth to him.

He wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling me with him toward the bedréien. “Would you like to test that, solnishko?”he asked, as he closed the: door behind us.

“Don’t ask stu pid questions,” I said, pulling my shirt off and throwing it further into the bedroom.

He laughed, his excitement clearly on his face. He grabbed my hips, picking te up and wrapping my legs around his waist. His wide unile dretched across his face as he walked us toward the shower. “If I haven’t told you lately I love you. More than I ever thought possible,” he said. He set ma denen on the sink as he turned the water in the shower on.

He pulled his shirt off as he walked back to me, smirking at the obvious last he could see in my eyes as I watchest him take his shurt aff. It didn’t seem to matter how many times I saw him without his shirt on, it was still the sex iest sight i’d ever seen.

He ran his hands up my thighs, grabbing my hips. He picked me up off the cutter, standing me in front of him. “Stephen could keep up with okay?” he asked as he pushed my leggings down my thighs

“Yeah, he didn’t have any problems. Iya either. We took it easy. Neither happened.” Laaid, holding on to his shoulder as I stepped out of my clothes.

He smiled as he stood up. “It wouldn’t have been pretty” he said, packing me sịa and the shower, unable to take his eyes away from milte

“Are they doing something different again?” I askor

anted to deal with you, Thani, and Saudia: 1. sinisilung

may lings abourad His waist coux max the walked as ala

“No, I just really love it when they turn blue,” he said, pressing his lips to mgh. I tell the gold me they showed that meant hat was thinking about Tam

much he loved me

I smiled against his lips. “I think they tam blue more than anything ehe. Praha, mali waweytining you do mukça me less you a little more. Even when

you obsess over me jogging around the block with only Misha and Stephen.”

He sighed heavily, not realizing I was just teasing him. “Sephie, once everything…” I cut him off, my lips preventing him from saying anything else. I knew he was worried about me because he didn’t want anything to happen to me again. I loved him for it. I also knew that once the other bosses were taken care of, it wouldn’t be an issue any longer. I needed him to know that loved him for it. I wrapped myself around him even tighter and deepened the kiss.

He pushed me against the wall of the shower, his kiss just as desperate as mine. With the wall and his body pressed against mine supporting most of me, his hands were free. He pulled back to look at me, putting both hands on my face. “I love you, Sephie. I can’t stand the thought of anything happening to you ever again.” I could feel his fear over the thought of something happening to me. I saw the look of confusion as he looked at me.

“White?” I asked. He nodded. “It’s your fear, love. I can feel it strongly. Almost as strong as your anger, which is why you can change them.”

He just stared at my eyes for a moment, then I felt the familiar pull in my chest that meant he was thinking about how much he loved me. I adored his look of satisfaction that appeared when my eyes changed to blue. “I know I said that black to purple might be my favorite transition, but that one is a very close second,” he said. His hands were still on either side of my face, his thumbs lightly rubbing my cheeks. He pressed his lips to mine, softly kissing me.

I moaned softly. His gentle kisses always managed to make me melt. I ran my hands through his hair, pressing my hips into his. It was all the encouragement he needed. I felt him slowly slide inside me, loving the feeling of fullness that came with it every single time. I leaned my head back against the shower wall, exhaling loudly as I reveled in the feeling. He laughed softly as his lips found my neck. “I will never get tired of your reaction to me. It’s almost more than I can handle every single time,” he said, his lips and tongue moving down my neck.

“Me too,” I said breathlessly. I grinned at him as he pushed himself into me harder, eliciting a moan from me. His handsome smile stretched across his face as he pushed himself into me even harder, causing me to moan even louder. I knew how much he loved teasing me.

I wrapped my arms around his shoulders, my lips finding his. My body was nothing but pleasure as he kept his rhythm slow, his kiss gentle. With each. thrust, with each touch, with each kiss, the fire in my body was building. My breaths were heavy as he kept slowly pushing me toward the edge. Just as I started to get close, he backed off, making me wait. I made a noise halfway between a whimper and a moan when he backed off, causing him to laugh softly as he kissed my neck. “Trust me, solnishko,” he said, his lips against my neck.

He pushed into me harder, pushing me closer to the edge once more. This time was even more intense. I squeezed my legs around his waist, grabbing his shoulders. I could feel my pu ssy throbbing around his co ck. I moaned, pushing my hips into him harder. He backed off once more, but this time, he grabbed a fistful of hair and kissed me deeply, which helped me with some of my extreme frustration that was also building.

He chuckled, as he could feel it too. “I promise it’s worth it,” he said against my lips. I groaned into his mouth. Once again, he pushed into me, even harder this time. I was so close. “Please,” 1 pleaded with him, breathlessly, trying to get him not to back off this time. His lips found mine once more.” He increased his rhythm, pushing into me hard and fast. My or gasm was almost immediate. It was so intense that my entire body felt like it was on fire. I loved the feeling and pushed it to him. As soon as it felt like I was coming down, he pushed me back over the edge.

I could do nothing but try and hang on to him as he pushed my body to even greater limits of pleasure. Finally, he found his own release. He pressed his body against mine as he caught his breath. He stepped back enough that I could unwrap my legs from his waist, standing in front of him as I worked to catch my breath. He watched me closely, still worried that I would panic. It was easier this time.

“No white,” he said, pulling us both under the water.

I smiled up at him. “Told you it was getting easier. I think there was something to seeing your eyes go black last time it happened. I think it helped me more than I realized.”

He looked at me thoughtfully, his finger lightly tracing the details of my face. He placed his hand on the back of my neck, kissing me gently. “I will never send you away for any reason again. I’ll always be there to protect you. Always,” he said.

My breath hitched at his words. I saw the look that meant something was happening with my eyes. I didn’t even care. I just needed him to know that I loved him. I pressed my body to his, my lips to his, pushing my warmth to him. “I love you, Adrik. More than anything,” I said, resting my head on his chest as he held me tightly.

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Stubic

Since either Ihya or Viktor slept for the majority of Ilya's first week here, Stephen took over master of schedule duties to give Viktor a break. Stephen said he needed a way to burn off his extra energy he was still enjoying since he'd broken Armando anyway. Ivan and the Wonder Twins had things they needed to take care of that afternoon, which meant I was stuck with Viktor. O more like he was stuck with me.

Iva, to his credit, was very curious about everything and asked questions most of the afternoon. He wanted to know how long I'd been able to do the things I could do, how it happened, if I'd told anyone else before, he wanted to know everything. I didn't mind. It helped me feel more comfortable with Viktor and eased my irritation with him.

Orsor Ilya had satisfied his curiosity about me, it was my turn. "Okay, Ilya, nows your chance to dish on your older brother. How was he when you were kids? Was he a jerk? Bossy? Who's the perfect brother? Who's the troublemaker?" I asked, grinning at Viktor.

Viktor looked at Iva. They both had smiles as they looked to me. "Sasha," they said, laughing.

"You're only saying that because that poor guy isn't here to defend himself," said, laughing with them.

"No, it's true, sestrichka. Sasha was always the hellion," Viktor said.

"It's because he's short," Ilya said, still laughing.

"He's short? No way. You're both giants. It clearly runs in your family," I said

"It sk ipped him. He's still not over it." Viktor said, his deep laugh filling the room. I had to admit that I'd missed hearing his laugh. He caught me looking at him thoughtfully.

"You're lighter when you laugh now. You both are, actually. It's good to see," I said. I got up and went to the kitchen. I didn't say anything to either of them, I just started pulling out things I would need to make Stephen his favorite cookies.

They both eventually followed me to the kitchen. "What are your plans now, ya? You're done with your service, no?" I asked, mostly to keep them from asking me what I was doing.

"I haven't decided. I'm done, so now it's time to figure out what I want to be when I grow up," he said, his warm smile across his face.

"What would be the dream setup?" I asked.

He glanced at Viktor, then back to me. "Something similar to what Viktor has, think. My training isn't up to his standards, but it's similar. I can catch up quickly."

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I looked at Viktor. "Let him replace one of the little flowers. Hell, he could replace both of them and it would still be better. Vitaliy is planning on staying in the city now for a bit, especially since he's taking Armando's house. ya will still be close. Alyosha can catch his training up, too."

Viktor looked to Ilya to gauge his interest in the idea. "That's a good idea, sestrichka."

"You have to make it Vitaliy's idea though. He's already looking for replacements for the little flowers, but they've left a sour taste in his mouth, so to speak. Let him see Ilya training with us. It will start the relationship off better if Vitaliy feels like he's choosing you versus you asking him for a job," I said. "He didn't work out this morning, so he will in the morning. Best to let him see Ilya before he moves." I studied Ilya for a minute, then looked back at Viktor. "He's faster than you are, so either let him spar with Misha or me. It'll make him look even better," I said, winking at Ilya.

"How did you know he was faster?" Viktor asked.

"He's leaner like Misha. Misha is faster than you, Stephen, and Andrei. Ivan is deceptively fast for as big as he is, but he's also a special circumstance so he doesn't necessarily count," ! said.

1/2

3

"Apparently "x settled * Vann eðć, smiling

As Vikler must! Tha continued talking. ↑ muddenly had a thenight pop couldn't help mireet! I did xay Dhoring a lull in their head !

Hy wasn't going to like me bringing it up, but I ersation, I asked Viktor. "Rostra is coming to almost every night now, isn't he?*

it feels like

and I talking night now,

Viktor locked surprised for a moment, but then he smiled. "He is. It's still

"He only came necasionally before becau He's been waiting" I said

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"How did you know? Viktor poked, surpri

"Wana pre in my head hurt.

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What are you working on he asked, looking at Dec bond of cookie dough

i grinned at him. "litephens is still enjoring the extra energi be get,

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"That was hacking impressive."1 sail when Mäckor started tallong again. I could hear ban laugh in huu haut, beut har Tack | went back to working on Stephen's cookies, smiling to mussell.

man even husted at a smile on his

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Sephie

I fell asleep quickly that night, across Adol's chest. I found myself in my dadiless I fully expected saw my dad appear before me, but it never did Instead, it just continued to get brighter. I glanced around, trying to first

"Holy sh it. Creepier than anything else I've ever seen here," I said He giggled Sh it. Da mmit! Apparently, I'm incapable of not cursing in front of you Tell si

When I fun

fade and the path to the house where i always

ept there was nothing around ine. The light

to was a small boy in front of me.

chich made me realize that Ed post cursed in front of a child "Cap

parent I'm very sorry?" I said.

He giggled again, walking closer to me. "Do you know who I am

he asked.

I studied him for a few moments. There was a familiarity to him, but I knew hit me. "Kastva? Lasked.

never seen him before. I chewed on my bottom lip, then it suddenly

His boyish grin spread across his face. He nodded. "This is the form that Viklikes best, so I use it the most. I wasn't sure how much you'd looked in his head. I didn't want to confuse you."

"I haven't looked in his head at all, Kostya. I don't do that. Why does nobody elieve me about that?"

He giggled again. "Because we would all take advantage of being able to read people's thoughts, so we can't possibly fathom that you wouldn't want

to."

"It's not all burritos and sunshine, kid. There's lots of things I wish I'd never en," I said. I looked at him, curious. "Why are you here?"

"You feel a difference with Viktor that you don't with the rest of them," he sa. He waited for me to agree with his statement before he continued. "The others are like you, Adrik, and Ivan now. They'll eventually be able to wk between Heaven and Hell. They'll learn how to make their demons

work for them."

He didn't need to finish and I knew. "Viktor wants no part of that," I said.

Kostya smiled. "Your dad said you were smart. You're right. He had a choice and he chose to stay away from Hell. As such, his connection to you will never be as strong as the others. Same for them. They'll never be as connected to him as they are to each other."

"Does it mean he really wants to leave?" I asked.

"No, he told you he was all in and he is. But the demons scare him. Viktor's sol isn't as old as yours, you have to remember. It doesn't have as much experience." He paused, taking a deep breath. "It's also why you're irritated sand can't figure out why. It's not you, it's your demon that's irritated."

1 laughed. "My demon's feelings are hurt? Why do I find that endearing?"

"Your demon hasn't always been a demon, Sephie. It started out as a soul, just like you. Because you've made friends with it and you're using it for good, you're helping it repair the damage done by the evil it gave in to. You're giving it a better existence than it could ever have if it continued to give in to evil. It's hurt. It feels like Viktor is rejecting it. Your connection is onger with Adrik and Ivan because of your demons. Your connection with Misha, Andrei, and Stephen is becoming stronger because they want to p their own demons. Viktor asked for his demon to be taken away. Your demons all know this, without you knowing this."

"Is he still scared of me?"

"He can separate the two. He's not scared of you, but the demons still unnerve him. They always have, it you remember. He's always had the hardest time with your eyes changing, even before you knew it was your demon stepping forward," he said.

"How do I help him not be scared?"

"It will take time. I've been helping him as much as I can. You were right. I he been coming to him every night, trying to help him accept everything. There's a small part of him that doesn't trust your demons still."

I thought for a minute. "Does it have to do with his time in the Syrian prison?

He giggled again. "He said you were smart. He didn't say you were this smart

does. The man who would torture Viktor was completely consumed by a demon. Viktor saw glimpses. When your eyes change, he can't help but remember that time. He knows it's not the same, but he still struggles to

remember that," he said.

"How do I help him get over that?"

"You can't," he said and I immediately felt my hopes come crashing down. "Bet Stephen can. Adrik told him that he was going to level up soon. That's true. Stephen will be able to take Misha's hatred for Giana and get rid of it. Hell also be able to take everything Viktor still carries from his time in prison and get rid of it."

"How? Doesn't he need to give it back to the people that gave it to Misha and Viktor?"

"Not once he levels up. He spent so much time trying to find ways to transmite the pain from his childhood that he's going to be able to do it for other people. He knows the struggle of not being able to get rid of something that feels like it's killing you slowly. He's going to be able to help others with that. That's partly why he's so happy now. He knows, without knowing, that he helped you to feel better and it's made him ecstatic."

I felt the tears welling up in my eyes as I thought about everything Stephen had gone through. For him to still want to help people after all that said everything anyone would need to know about what kind of person he is. I loved him a little more for it.

"How do we get over feeling irritated around Viktor?" I asked.

Once again, his boyish giggle filled the space. "You need to love your demon n little extra until they're convinced Viktor isn't rejecting thein."

"Okay, I understand why you laughed at that. This is not a conversation I ever thought I'd be having. Will Viktor feel left out, though? Because his connection isn't as strong as the others?"

"I don't think so. I think he prefers it. It's less he has to think about or feel. He has so much on his mind already that even just the little bit he's gotten from you feels very overwhelming to him."

"Can I make it less for just him? I don't want to overwhelm him. He doesn't hood another reason to avoid me," I said.

Kostya surprised me by walking to me, grabbing my hand. "He still loves you, Sephie. He loves you very much. It's going to take his soul longer to get to the point the rest of you are at. That's all it is. You can stop worrying about him leaving." I tried to blink back the tears, but I couldn't keep them in. Kostya grabbed my other hand. As he did, everything got brighter for a moment and suddenly I felt better. Lighter.

"You just fixed me, didn't you?"

He nodded, smiling sweetly up at me. "You had to endure abandonment to get you here, but you don't ever have to worry about that again." He raised my left hand, looking at my ring. "You still don't know the significance of this, but they will always be with you and they will always protect you."

"Let me guess, you're not allowed to tell me either, are you?"

"Not that one, Sephie. You have to figure it out for yourself. But I'm sure you can connect the dots. You always do," he said, winking at me.

I knelt down, so I was eye-level with him. "In another life, Viktor is very proud of the man you're going to grow up to be," I said.

His face lit up as his smile beamed at me. It was the last thing I saw as everything faded back to black and I could once again only see my body. I could feel Adrik's hand lightly running up and down my back as he talked softly to me, trying to wake me up. He felt me stir and pulled me closer.

"Good morning, solnishko. Were you dreaming? You were all over the place for a few minutes there," he said as I picked my head up to test my chin

on his chest.

I smiled at him. "Kostya," I said, laughing at his shocked expression.

"What? How?"

"Same as my dad and your mom. Just a different location. Not gonna lie, it was creepy as f uck to turn around and see a little kid in front of me. Was not expecting that," I said.

Adrik's eyes went wide. "Kids are scary. I completely agree. What did he need to tell you?

"I know why Viktor feels different to us now."

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Adrik

“Why?” I asked Sephie, completely captivated by her out of control hair that was everywhere all at once,

“When Misha said we unlocked a new life goal for him and both Andrei and Stephen agreed, they strengthened the connection. They’ll eventually be like us. They’ll be able to walk between Heaven and Hell,” she said.

7

I inhaled. “Viktor wants no part of that,” I said.

She nodded her head, saying, “our demons still freak him the f uck out.” She grimmed at me, as she got up, straddling me. “Are you ready for this next part, because it might actually be my favorite,” she said, giggling.

I sat up a little more, my hands running over her thighs. “I can’t wait,” I said,niling at her amusement.

“The irritation we all feel around Viktor now isn’t us. It’s our demons. They’re hurt because they feel like he rejected them when he asked for his demon to be taken away,” she said. “I can’t help it. I might love my demon a little more for that. Poor thing. That’s a hard pill to swallow.”

I had to admit to feeling a pang of sympathy for my demon as well. “He asked or his to be taken away? How does that work?” I asked.

“I assume Kostya did it, but I didn’t think to ask for specifics. I had too many her questions for him,” she said, as she placed her hands on my chest. She looked down at her ring, which she never took off. I might’ve loved that about her. She looked back up at me, saying, “both my dad and Kostya have said this ring has more significance than I realize and I can’t figure out what they mean by that.”

“Did they say anything else about it? Or just that it’s significant?”

“My dad said it was significant. Kostya said I didn’t understand yet, but that

and the guys would always be with me and would always protect me

as he was looking at it. I asked him if he could tell me and he said no, but he said I would connect the dots.”

I laughed. “He meant that literally, solnishko. Connect the five rubies.”

She looked at her ring, trying to still figure out what I meant. She looked at me, still completely confused. I took her hand and drew the outline of a pentagram on the back of her hand. “Five points equal a pentagram, solnishk It’s an ancient symbol of protection. That’s why the big diamond is square. It was the only way to arrange the rubies so they would form the pertagram the way I wanted it. I wanted one ruby to always be on top of the others. For Ivan. The big diamond is both of us, because you are my heart. The rubies are always protecting you,” I said, as I pointed it out on her ring. When I looked at her, her mouth was open in shock.

“You…how…” She closed her mouth, trying to formulate a complete thought ried not to, but I laughed at her. She was so adorable when she was confused. By the looks of her, she should’ve felt like she was all over the place, but all I felt from her was her warmth. Her eyes were the deepest depth of the ocean blue as well.

I smiled at her. “Ivan gave me the color scheme. I sketched out a few options. One day during a meeting, I found myself doodling with the sketch of this design and happened on the pentagram. Like many symbols, it’s been thought of as good and bad, but that’s kind of perfect. We’re both, too. I didn’t expect that you would never take it off, but it makes me happy that you always have it on. It’s one more small way I can feel like you’re protected.”

“I can’t believe you put this much thought into it,” she said. She had tears falling down her cheeks, but her eyes were still blue. I looked at her, confused at the tears. “Nobody has ever put this much thought into something for me before,” she said. She wrapped her arms around my neck, holding onto me for dear life and pushing all her warmth to me. I held her just as tightly. I would never want to let her go.

We were all in the gym that morning. Vitaliy and all of his men were there as well. He was still trying to find a replacement for the two guys he hated. It was proving more difficult than he would’ve liked. I think it made him hate Dose guys a little more with each passing day

Sephie had talked Andrei into letting her train harder now that her lung was better. She’d been slowly increasing the intensity. She was probably back to 90% now, which I was sure was 100% more than Vitaliy’s little flowers.

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She was door thy to get as the boy with bm harten hat same withing bot har hem while short to lost je wat migrend for TERHINDA 36 atan muda kar poseght Phra so get her sand word, die man gàng do se tady / war atually belong brent is sorry some ants the tale o

Nolly’s pant’s mes all want wide what they sale har stay ins the ting with pm They all inter foun’s lughtition. They work at scared of tum mgartaly afar saming him gar with me. They quickly decided tur te was phlity to ise training her our gunting with fun, and the quiete, ha interest. I laughed, warning they & Pa Burk

se you” he said to the loden wovely bakes allows when te tekenf him so th

“If je wera antyone else, I’d be offended, but I do aggraria

ism you” she said the oil sorted him in his doulder when to

grinning at kits. “But starte nor is such as you planned” die suid

I was setically counting down in my head for how long it took Vitality’s men totala notiex. I was rigin. Jeni aveonds of fun and leghia beginning

and they quickly saw they’d been wrong. Pe was not noining hed the way they thought he was going do

The seemingly endless monks of diete, andurve training had made her technique next to pedieet, but it had made her as much mringer. She stil as fast as the normally was, but nobody for outside our group would’w knows that..

Two minutes in and I saw hat grit at her. He had underestimated her when they first started. She was going him more of a run for his money than he thought she would. He was actually having to work a little. I felt my heart wall watching her hold her own with him

was so adept at anticipating your ned move that the managed to land a few kicks on fram. If he could feel pain, he might teen some mom Because she knew that he wouldn’t feel it, she didn’t hold back one bit. I was bery happy to see it.

Vitally walked up beside me. “I said it before, but that wonta was made for you. She is perfect

y possible way,” he said, completely ave studi

“I think that at least 100 times each day,” I said, not taking my eyes off ban and Sephie.

“She’s back to normal now?” be sled

isn’t everything she’s got. She’s maybe 905% now.”

Vitally cursed quietly. “Does she want a job? Can I hire her?” he asked, a mischievous grin sliding across his face.

I laughert. “No chance, old man.”

Sephie was starting to reach the end of her endurance. Her face was red and her breathing was heavy. I could feel her getting tired. This was the she’d done in months. She still looked strong. It was her cardio that couldn’t keep up. Her lung was going to remain the weak link for a little longer

han saw it too. He ended the match by surprising her. He rushed her and the her over his shoulder. “No fair!” she yelled, smacking his back.

He laughed, setting her down. “You’re breathing heavier than I’d like, princess. That’s enough for today,” he said. I expected her to argue with him, but she just grinned at him and threw her arms around his neck. He caught my eye. “She’s happy she made me sweet he told me. I just laughed.

They climbed out of the ring while Misha and Ilya climbed in. I raised my eyebrow watching those two cũn surprise. She glanced at Vitally, saying, “you should watch this one, too. Misha is almost as fast as han”

“You’re planning something, aren’t you?” I asked her as I watched Misha and liga’s match start.

“Yep.”

the ring together. Sephie saw my

“Are you gonna tel

“Nope,” she said. I could hear her laughing, but she looked like the was watching Misha and Ilya. I laughed quietly, moving her in front of me, pulling

her back against

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Adrik

“You caught your breath right away. That’s definite progress,” I said.

“It’s getting easier each time. I was starting to have issues with catching my breath at the end, but I didn’t panic about it this time.”

1 wrapped my arms around her tighter. She held her arms on top of mine, leaning her head against my shoulder. She looked happy. Lighter. Everything that had happened lately seemed to be leaving and her light was brighter again.

I had expected Vitaliy to get tired of watching Misha and Ilya, but he stayed the entire time. They were well-matched. Ilya was fast, like Misha. They were similar in height and build. It made for a good match. As it ended, Vitaly looked at me. “Viktor’s brother. What are his plans? Is he done with his service?”

I understood what Sephie had been planning at that moment. I nodded my hal. “Yeah, he’s out. I’m not sure what his plans are though. I don’t think he has any yet. I think he’s trying to figure that out. Viktor was talking about giving him a job.”

“He knows everything about all of you?” he asked.

I nodded. “Most everything, I think.”

“He’s okay with it?”

“Yeah, he even did some research to find out what it was that was hanging on to him when he first got here that jumped to Sephie that first night,” said.

Vitaliy looked impressed. He glanced back across the gym toward Ilya, then to his little flowers. He walked away, calling Aleksei to him. They walked away from everyone, deep in discussion.

I turned Sephie to face me, her wide smile across her face. “You set that up, didn’t you?”

“Ilya wants a job, much like what Viktor has. Vitaliy needs replacements for his little flowers. Ilya could replace both of them for the moment and they’d still be fine. But we both know it’ll go better if it’s Vitaliy’s idea versus Ilya asking him for a job. So I might’ve suggested this happen,” she said, grinning at me. Her eyes were sparkling in the bright lights of the gym.

“Your idea to put him in with Misha too?” I asked. She nodded. “How did you know they’d make a good match?”

“They’re built the same. Misha is the fastest, next to Ivan who shouldn’t count because he’s superhuman.”

I just looked at her in wonderment. “Perfect in every way,” I said quietly, leaning down to kiss her.

That night at dinner, Vitaliy looked at Ilya during a lull in the conversation. a, what are your plans now that you’re done with your service?” he asked.

I looked to Sephie, who was smiling at me.

“I’m looking for a job, sir. Something similar to what Viktor has, if I can find it Ilya said.

Vitaliy said, “I can give you a job. I need another guy who has actual training. You clearly have training.”

“Really?” he said, excited. He quickly cleared his throat, then said, “that would be great, sir.”

“We’ll talk more,” Vitaliy said, waving his hand in front of him. “But you’ll come work for me. You can stay close to Viktor for a while. I’ve decided to stay for a bit longer now that I have a house here again.”

“Thank you, sir.” Ilya said. He looked to Sephie, smiling widely at her. She winked at him.

“How’s it going furnishing your house, Vitaliy?” she asked.

“I might hate shopping as much as you do, sladkaya. I hired someone to do it for me,” he said, his sly grin evident.

“Smart man,” she said.

While everyone else was talking, I made sure Ivan would stay in the penthouse after everyone else left. “Sephie had a conversation with Kostya last night. She knows why Viktor feels different to all of us now. If you can, stay when everyone else leaves. Or else come back. She wants to tell the other three too, but not when Viktor is around. She’s worried about singling him out.”

“Yeah, I would really like to know why I feel irritated around him now.”

“You’re going to love it,” I said, laughing.

Ivan came up with an excuse to pull me aside while everyone else was leaving to make it look like he’d forgotten to tell me something important. Vitaliy and Aleksei both went to their rooms for the night, so it was just the bree of us in the penthouse.

Ivan looked at Sephie expectantly. “Kostya came to you?” he asked.

“Yeah. Kind of creepy, not gonna lie. I mean, he’s adorable, but I was not expecting to turn around and have a little boy standing in front of me. Also? Hét like four curse words fly out of my mouth, then promptly felt like a heathen for cursing in front of a child. I apologized to his parents before- figured out who he was,” she said.

Ivan and I both laughed. “That tracks,” we both said.

“What did he tell you about why Viktor is different?” Ivan asked.

“When the Wonder Twins found out that you and Adrik could also control you demons, Misha said you guys just unlocked a new life goal for him. Andrei and Stephen both readily agreed. They essentially strengthened our corection because they made the choice to learn how to do what we do. They’re going to be able to walk between Heaven and Hell eventually.”

Ivan took a deep breath. “Let me guess. Viktor wants no part of that,” he said.

“Exactly. He asked to have his demon removed because he wants no part of Hell. He’s still unnerved by our demons. When he was in that Syrian prison, the guy that would torture him was completely consumed by his demot. Viktor caught glimpses. Now, he’s essentially having PTSD when he sees ours. He wants nothing to do with it,” she said.”

“He never told anyone,” Ivan said.

“Yeah. Are you surprised?” she said. We could both feel her irritation growing. She noticed it too. She grinned at Ivan. “That irritation we all feel? Yeah, that’s not really us. It’s our demons. They all feel like they’re being rejected by Viktor and it makes them itchy.”

“Shut up.”

“No, it’s true. You feel sympathy for yours, too. Don’t even try to lie about it said.

Ivan laughed. “Yeah, 100%. Poor thing. That’s actually kind of sweet.”

“Right? It’s very endearing. They knew what happened before any of us did and they’ve all been restless because of it. He’s over there terrified of them and they’re p issy because he doesn’t want to come over and play,” she said, laughing.

“But it’s this way for the Wonder Twins and Stephen too. How?” he asked.

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“The only thing I can think of is that their connection to their demons is already growing stronger since they made the choice. The connection that the three of us have is made stronger because of our demons. None of us will ever have the same connection with Viktor as a result, but Kostya thinks that Viktor prefers it that way, I have to agree. He said Viktor has so much on his mind on a normal day anyway that the extra baggage from me would be too much. He said the little bit he’s already gotten from me is somewhat overwhelming for him.”

“Can you make it less for him?” Ivan asked.

“Have you met me?” she said.

“Fair, totally fair. How can we help him cope with feeling you then?” he asked.

“That’s going to take time, Kostya said. But,” she saill, grinning at him. “Stephen gets to help him get over the time in prison.”

“How? Are we going to get the guy that tortured Viktor?” he asked.

“Nope. No need. Well, maybe there’s a need. Doesn’t sound like he’s a very no man, now that I think about it. Anyway, back to Yoden. He’s leveling up. He’s going to be able to get rid of Misha’s hatred for Giana and Viktor’s tinje in prison and everything that went with it. If he can feel more comfortable around our demons, I think it will be easier for all of us,” she said

“How is Stephen leveling up? Doesn’t he need to give it back to the person where it originated from?” Ivan asked.

“I asked the same thing. Kostya said that Stephen spent so much time trying to figure out how to transmute his own pain that now he’ll be able to do it for other people. That’s partly why he’s been so freaking happy since he bro Armando. He knows he helped me feel better and it’s made him ecstatic,” she said. I could see the tears welling up in her eyes. “How f ucking adorable is that?” she asked, wiping the tears from her eyes. I glanced at Ivan, who actually looked like he was fighting tears back too.

“This whole time, we thought he was a serial killer. Turns out that kid is a f ucking saint.” Ivan said.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 442

442

Adrik

Sephie was awake before me for once the next morning. I could feel her fingen lightly tracing circles on my hack as she tried to slowly wake me up. I pulled her even closer, burying my face in her neck. She laughed quietly as she moved her leg over my hips, pressing her body completely against mine.

"Let's stay like this the whole day," I said.

"Are you extra tired? Did you get zapped?" she asked. I could hear the concern in her voice, but I could also feel it.

"No. I just need a break." I pulled back so I could look at her, finally opening my eyes. Her eyes were swirling, but they landed on blue as she looked at me. "Let's go to the house this afternoon. I don't have that many meetings. Inight cancel them all."

"You'll hear no arguments from me. I think we could all use some time there What about Ilya though?" she asked.

I thought for a moment. I'd actually forgotten about him. If he was going to rk for Vitaliy, it wasn't the worst thing in the world for him to know about the house, but I still didn't like the idea of him knowing just yet. "I'll give Viktor the weekend off completely. He can spend more time with Ilya before he starts working for Vitaliy. Viktor will protest, since he hates taking time off and I'll suggest we go to the house so he won't worry about us all weekend."

"I learned how to plan things out from watching you," she said, grinning at me

"And I learned how to love you more than humanly possible from watching you." I said, kissing her. I could feel her warmth spreading through my body as I buried my face in her neck again.

"Time away will be good for all of us, I think. It'll give me a chance to catch the other three up on my conversation with Kostya. Maybe Stephen can experiment with helping Misha this weekend, too. He's been trying to let go of his hatred for Giana, but it's still there. It still comes back now and then when he least expects it," she said.

I laughed. "I still find it surprising that he got so angry with her. I didn't know that kid had it in him, but he clearly loves you. There's no doubt about that. They all do."

I felt her mood shift and pulled back from her so I could see her once more. Her eyes were swirling, but they were mostly amber and white, surprisingly. She saw the look on my face and explained. "I sometimes worry at their connection with me is keeping them cut off from living their lives. We all joked about it in Italy, but I can clearly see now that I've made ixceptionally difficult for them to find a girlfriend. Stephen might have an easier time, but only slightly. I don't want to keep them from making their own lives."

"I don't think you are, solnishko. They know that once I'm done for the day, they're free to go. It's always been that way. It will always be that way. If they wanted to find girlfriends right now, they could. They're choosing to spend more time with you because you give them what they need right now. They wouldn't be able to have the same conversations with a girlfriend that they have with you. At least not right away. What's happening to all of us is strange and not everyone is going to be able to handle it. They need to be more secure in themselves and what they can do before they're going to have a chance at finding a relationship that lasts. None of them are interested in just finding a woman to sleep with. They see what we have and they all want the same. They know it's going to be worth the wait."

She sighed, her eyes once again landing on the deepest depth of the ocean blu. Her fingers ran lightly through my facial hair as she smiled sweetly at me, "Sometimes I wonder what the hell I did to deserve you," she said.

"I wonder the same thing every single day," I said, burying my face in her neck once more. She wrapped her arms around me, holding onto me tightly as she let me have a few more minutes in bed with her before starting the day

The guys were waiting on us when we came out of the bedroom. Viktor was diere with Ilya, as well as Vitaliy and Aleksei I wasted no time setting my plan in motion. "Viktor, why don't you take the weekend and spend it with fyd before he starts work. You guys slept through his first week here. At least you'll have a couple more days to catch up," I said.

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Viktor started to protest, but Vitaly surprised me by interjecting. "You can help me find more security for my house, if you really want to work. But after that, you should spend time with your brother."

Viktor still looked unsure. He asked me, "you guys will be okay?"

Sephie smiled sweetly at him. "We can go away for the weekend. We'll be fine and you won't have to worry about us, Papa Bear."

His entire demeanor melted as she smiled at him. He wasn't going to argue any further.

"It's settled then," Vitaliy said, matter-of-factly.

"Were you trying to keep Viktor away or you just don't want Ilya at the house?" yan asked me as everyone started conversing.

"Iya. It wouldn't be the worst thing in the world for him to know about it, but not yet. I really need a break. Sephie does too, even though she's pushing through like the boss she is. She needs time to tell the other three about Kostya, too."

"We could all use the break. Except Stephen. He's still on cloud 9." Ivan said, laughing.

"You were right last night. That kid is a saint. I'm happy to see it. Nobody deserves it more than he does."

Ivan nodded his head discreetly in agreement and we both returned to the normal conversation going on around us. Stephen was asking Sephie to come up with a new name for Armando for when we took him to a nursing home.

"Richard. That way you can call him d ick the entire time and no one will know you're saying it with a lowercase 'd," she said flatly. The guys all laughed.

Dic kie had a drug problem that caused him to have a massive stroke and now he's catatonic," Stephen said, his smile that was showing itself more frequently lately across his face.

"That's perfect," Sephie said, grinning at him.

I decided to keep my meetings that day, rather than reschedule them. I asked Sephie if she could come to the last one, which always surprised her. "Who is it?" she asked.

"You'll see," I said. I enjoyed tormenting her maybe a little too much sometimes.

She walked into my office with the Wonder Twins just before the meeting started. Stephen walked in right behind them. She turned to see who it was and her face immediately lit up. "Vinny!" she said as she walked quickly to him. He brought his wife, Anna, with him as well. "And A nna!" she said, hugging both of them. Neal walked in shortly after, a look of amusement on face.

"I'm so happy to see both of you!" Sephie said, as they walked in, each taking a seat.

"Bella, it's always good to see you," Vinny said. He shook my hand before sitting down. "You too, sir," he said, taking a seat.

Sephie walked around my desk, stopping to kiss me quickly, then hopped on the cabinet behind my desk. Anna's salon had been repaired and was reopened, as were all the other businesses in that part of town. Since Niko and Vito were still in Italy with Sal, all of the underbosses had backed off of enforcing the increased taxes. They had all heard what happened to Anthony, Lorenzo, and Massimo. They all knew that no one had seen Armando or Dario in months. They were scared..

I looked to Neal, asking if he'd brought the paperwork. We had one restaurant owner in the new building project back out for personal reasons, so we had one space empty. I decided to offer it to Vinny at a discounted price so he could expand and open a second location, should he choose to. Neal got up and set down everything in front of Vinny.

Vinny started to look at everything, curious as to why I'd asked him here. Ne explained the building project to him. As he did, Sephie silently asked, "you're offering the vacant spot to Vinny so he can open a second location, arent you? I just turned slightly so I could see her, but didn't respond, "Just when I think I can't love you anymore than I already do…"

Neal explained about the empty space and then offered it to Vinny, should he want to expand to a second location, Vinny looked shocked, as did Anna.

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"There's no pressure, Vinny. It's only if you want to expand to a second location. I'm offering the space to you first before I make it known there's a space available," I said.

Vinny looked at Anna, then back to me. "We've been talking about a second location for years, sir. We just could never find the right spot. This spot is perfect. I can keep that place afloat just on the people in that build he sail.

"Smart man, Vinny. You'd be surprised how not obvious that is to some people" Sephie said sarcastically. Neal looked at her, unable to keep his laughter in.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 443

443

Adrik

Vinny looked through the paperwork. Anna leaned over, also glancing at the paperwork in front of them. They talked quietly to each other, discussing options.

“You can take it home and think about it, Vinny. I don’t need an answer today. I said, trying to take some of the perceived pressure off of them. “Everything you need is there. Feel free to call Neal or myself if you have questions.”

Vinny still looked too stunned to speak, but they both stood up. “i would appriciate just a little time to make sure this works for us,” he said. “But you’ll have your answer by Monday, at the latest.”

“That’s fine, Vinny, I know you have a lot going on. Take all the time you need It’s yours until you decide you don’t want it,” I said, standing with them. Sephie jumped off the cabinet and came to stand next to me.

Vinny looked at her, smiling at her. “Somehow I think you had something to do with this, bella.”

“Nope. This was all him. He might’ve thought about it because my stomach is a long-term relationship with you, but really that’s on you. You did this to yourself, Vinny,” she said. She’d put her contacts in before coming to the meeting, but I knew her eyes were green.

Vinny and Anna both laughed at her statement. They both thanked me and hugged Sephie once again before Stephen escorted them back downstairs. Neal stayed for a few more minutes, catching me up on other business. I noticed Sephie walk to Misha and Andrei, asking them both their thoughts on what Vinny would do. They quietly discussed everything while Neal and I talked about other matters.

I caught myself thinking back to the conversation we’d had that morning, where she was concerned she was keeping them from living their own lives. I watched as they readily discussed things with her that I knew for a fact they wouldn’t be able to discuss with anyone else. She gave them a space to be completely authentic. She just didn’t realize how important that was yet. She didn’t know they’d do whatever it took to keep it.

We got to the house early enough that Sephie wanted to take a walk first thing. She loved being able to go outside without fear of anything. It made me feel somewhat guilty that we hadn’t been to the house in a while..

“Don’t feel guilty,” she said, lacing her fingers through mine as we walked toward the woods. “We’re here now. That’s what matters.”

We walked in silence, enjoying the last bit of daylight. I could feel the stress melting away as we walked. I smiled to myself, thinking about how Sephie really was magic in her own way. She always knew just what I needed.

She felt the pull in my chest and glanced up at me. She smiled her sweet smile that spark in her eyes that was reserved only for me. “I can say the same for you, you know,” she said as we headed back toward the house.

I stopped her before we got all the way out of the woods, pulling her against me. I loved the way the fading daylight made her hair look. There were at least ten different shades of red and orange in the last rays of sunlight. It made her hair look like it really was on fire. Fier eyes were normal, which was becoming a rarity, but I found myself loving it just as much as when they changed. Those were the eyes that I fell in love with. Those were the eyes that first looked at my soul and loved every piece of me.

I smiled at her, turning away from her. “Get on. We both know you don’t walk back to the house,” I said. I heard her giggle as she jumped on my back. She wrapped her arms around my neck and shoulders as I bounced her higher and walked us back to the house. I could feel her happiness the entire
way.

The guys were all in the back room when we got back. She ditched her coat and went to the kitchen to start dinner. We all happily followed her. Viktor still felt somewhat guilty about taking the weekend off, even though it was my idea, so he made sure there were plenty of gitceries at the house when
we arrived.

She started pulling things out of the refrigerator as the guys all moved to the chairs around the kitchen island. I caught her glancing at all of them.

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She had come up with a new signal for Andrei, since I caught their last one. wasn’t going to tell her I’d caught this one as well. She found the answer to her silent question, a small smile on her face.

She stopped what she was doing, looking at all of them. “You’re all wondering hy Viktor irritates you now, aren’t you?”

There was an audible exhale from all of them. “YES,” they all groaned.

“We’ve been trying to figure it out. We also think Ivan knows something he’s not telling us,” Misha said. He was clearly frustrated with not being able to solve the puzzle.

Sephie giggled. “Ivan does know something. He found out last night, but he’s being nice to me and letting me tell you,” she said, winking at Ivan.

“Why didn’t we find out last night?” Misha asked. He was somewhat indignant about the matter, which made it even funnier.

“Because I didn’t want Viktor to be around when I told you. It’s easier to ask one of you to stay behind than it is for me to ask Viktor to go away so we can obviously talk about him,” she said.

“That’s why we’re here, isn’t it?” Stephen asked.

I nodded. “Well, not the only reason. I needed a break. She needed a way to tell you guys what happened without Viktor around. She’s worried about singling him out. She doesn’t want him to feel left out of anything,” I said.

“What happened, spider monkey? What do you know?” Andrei asked..

“Kostya came to me. Same way my dad and his mom come to me. Just slightly creepier because I wasn’t expecting a kid,” she said as they all laughed at her still obvious discomfort. She explained why they all felt different around Viktor now.

“But we don’t control our demons the same way you three do,” Andrei said.

“Not yet, you don’t. But you made the choice to learn how to. By doing so, I think your connection is already stronger. Your connections to me are stronger, as well as Adrik now. If it’s not already, it will be to Ivan soon, too. The connections between the three of us are stronger because of our demons. It should be that way with you three soon. As such, we’ll never have the same kind of connection with Viktor,” she said. “But that’s okay, too. He has good reason to be afraid of our demons. It’s just going to take his soul little longer to get to the point that we’re at. He’s still very much all in with what’s going on. He’s not going anywhere.” She looked at Stephen, her wide smile stretching across her face, as she added, “and Yoden gets to help him deal with his trauma so that he’s more comfortable around us.”

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Chapter 444

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Sephie

“What? How?” Stephen asked when I told him

I laughed. han said, “I asked the same

get to help Viktor with hi

“Are we going to get the guy that tortured him?”

“No. Adrik told you that you were going to level up. He wasn’t lying.” I said. arm across his shoulders. “You spent so much of your life trying to figure out other people do it. You can break a person, but you can also help people

miled at his olivious confusion. I walked to Stephen’s side, sliding my

Transmute your pain that now you’re going to be able to help things that are slowly killing them.”

Stephen was quiet for a few moments. He looked at Adrik and very seriouslyd, “this was not the level up I was expecting, but I’ll take it. Demon crushing is still on the table. Just putting that out there.”

“That’s the reason you’ve been so happy after breaking Armando, Stephen. Well thought it was because you got high off Boss’s supply, if you will. But you’ve been happy because you know you helped Sephie feel better,” Ivanaid.

“Ivan’s right. He also said last night that this whole time we’ve all thought you were a serial killer, but it turns out you’re a saint. Honestly, I could not agree more,” Adrik said.

I had tears in my eyes. I wasn’t expecting them to tell him what they said, but was happy they did. I could see the emotions flash across his face as he took in everything they’d just said. He looked up at me, still somewhat beddered. “It’s true?” he asked quietly.

“It’s true. You took all the bad and turned it into something good. You should be able to do it on a smaller scale soon, too. You have arguably the most ba da ss gift out of all of us and somehow you keep making it better. I don’t know if the world can handle demon crushing,” I said.

I watched as his smile stretched across his face, making his entire demeanor bghter. We could all see how much stronger his light was. His entire childhood, he’d had to endure his sisters telling him he was anything but good and having to endure their horrific torture regularly. Now, we were telling him that not only was he ultimately saving souls, but also helping others deal with their trauma in ways that they wouldn’t be able to otherwise. He stood up, pulling me into his vampiric vice-grip of a hug.

As his grip on me loosened, he turned toward Misha. “Guess we’re going to have that conversation about what to do with your hatred toward Giana after all,” he said.

I laughed. Adrik looked at Misha, smiling. “I still can’t believe you got so angry with her. I didn’t know you had it in you,” he said.

“Honestly? I didn’t either. I don’t quite understand why what she did made me so angry, but it did,” Misha said. He thought for a moment, then looked back up at all of us. “Yeah, still does.”

“Usually when you have that strong of a reaction toward someone, it’s because they’re showing you something you don’t like about yourself. It’s the same reason Viktor is uncomfortable around our demons. He’s not comfortable around his own and ours serve as a reminder of that. It’s why he asked for his to be removed. Same thing for you, my adorable Russian guardian. There’s some part of the way Giana acted that you see in yourself and you don’t like it,” I said. “Let Stephen help you with it, but don’t stop trying to figure out why it made you angry to begin with so you can learn from it.. Stephen is not here to be your trash compactor,” I said, trying to look at him sternly.

Misha flashed his handsome smile at me. “I would never take advantage of such an opportunity,” he said, innocently. He managed to get the entire sentence out before he laughed, then added, “yeah, that’s a total lie. You’re going to have to set firm boundaries with me, Stephen.”

“Noted,” Stephen said, laughing with him.

Adrik looked between Andrei and Misha. He asked, “are you two able to communicate with each other now?” They both looked at each other, like they’d been caught doing something they shouldn’t have been doing. It made drik laugh. “You’re not in trouble for it. I’ve just noticed a few silent conversations where you seem like you make a decision without saying anything. I’m curious,” he said.

“I don’t think it works the same as you and Sephie or you and Ivan. It’s more like snapshots we can send each other. It just started,” Andrei said. He looked at me, silently asking if he could tell everyone that he and I figured out a way to communicate with each other. I smiled at him, nodding my head. “It’s similar to how Sephie and I communicate. We show each other what we want the other one to see when we look in each other’s heads. It’s

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kind of the same with Misha, but since he doesn’t really look in my head, I have to send it to him differently.”

“I know you and Sephie figured out a way to communicate. I caught your signals to each other,” Adrik said, winking at me. “But since you two are the same, it makes sense. I’m impressed that you figured out a way to communicate with Misha.”

Andrei looked slightly relieved, his handsome smile stretching across his face. Misha added, “it’s getting easier the more we practice at it. I haven’t figured out yet how it would work with Stephen, but there’s gotta be a way with him, too. Everything got stronger when Stephen broke Armando.”

“Have you started to feel Ivan the same way you felt Adrik after that happened?” I asked.

“Not as much. Boss is stronger. Not as strong as you, but he’s a close second now. Maybe it has to do with anger. Maybe Ivan needs to go nuclear and then it’ll be stronger for him, too,” Misha said.

“Or maybe we feel Boss more strongly because your connection to him is strenger and it comes through from you, spider monkey,” Andrei said.

“Both theories make sense, honestly. I have no idea what it actually is. I like it though,” I said, grinning at all of them.

“Do you think Viktor is going to feel left out that he doesn’t have as strong of connection to the rest of us?” Misha asked.

I sighed. “Kostya told me he prefers it that way and I have to agree with him Viktor has so much on his mind at any given point that having to deal with the hot mess that is me feels very overwhelming to him. Kostya even said that the little bit he has felt from me has almost been too much for him.” I stopped what I was doing, looking at Adrik first, then at the other four. I think it’s harder to take because everything is so strong between us and we all enjoy it. We just want Viktor to be a part of that.”

Adrik walked up behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist. “Viktor is a big boy. He made his choice and we need to respect that. Kostya told Sephie that he’s still all in, so until he does something to make me question that, I’m operating as if he’s all in. He has a very specific gift. If he doesn’t want to be a part of the rest of it, then he doesn’t need to be. I think between the rest of us, we can make any situation work.”

“If his connection to Sephie isn’t as strong, he might not be of any help in other situations anyway,” Ivan said. “That might be by design, now that I think about it.”

I chewed on my bottom lip, trying to find more answers when I didn’t really know the questions. “I feel like I want to protect Viktor from everything weird happening now. Like now I’m not sure he can handle it,” I said.

“I think that will get better once I figure out how to help him with his trauma. When you have unresolved trauma, any little thing suddenly becomes a very big thing. If he’s still struggling that much with his time in prison, then he’s not able to handle anything else. He got rid of the grief, which clouded everything, but it also uncovered other stuff he hasn’t dealt with,” Stephen said.

I smiled at Stephen. “You’re so wise, Stephen. I’m glad you finally decided to show everyone.”

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Sephie

Stephen surprised both Misha and I by asking if he could go with us for a run the next morning. “I figure I need to take advantage of it now while you’re still keeping it short and slower so I can ease myself into it. I know Boss doesn’t like the idea of just Misha running with you when we’re at the penthouse, but he might eventually warm up to the idea of both of us going with you. I just need to get better at it.”

“That, my favorite enabler, might be one of the more thoughtful things anyone has done for me lately,” I said.

The three of us set out for a short run. Misha, who used to dread going the long route at the house, was now slightly disappointed that we were taking the short route. I could feel his sullen mood before we left the house. “Don’t worry, my adorable Russian guardian. My lung is getting better really quickly. We’ll be able to go the long route again soon,” I said, h ooking my arm through his as we walked around the pool and past the gardens.

“I never thought I would be disappointed with the short route, but here we are” he said, laughing at himself.

Stephen was able to keep up without much trouble the entire time. It wasn’t as easy for him as it was for Misha, but Misha had also started out much in the same spot as Stephen was in now too. As we slowed to a walk, Stephen said, “I’m probably going to regret that tomorrow.”

I was still working to catch my breath, but managed to say, “you’ll be fine, Stephen. You kept up the whole way.” Misha looked down at me, suddenly alarmed that I hadn’t caught my breath yet. I smiled at him, but stopped walking to try to make it easier.

“I’m okay. I’m not panicking,” I assured them. I just needed a minute of not moving.

Misha glanced at Stephen, clearly worried. Misha hadn’t seen me not be able to catch my breath before. He was used to me running for hours and barely breaking a sweat. I could feel his worry turning to panic with each second that I struggled to control my breathing. “You’re not helping,” I said, in between breaths.

“I can’t help it, gazelle. I’ve never seen you like this. I don’t know what to do and I don’t like it,” Misha said. “I think I should carry you back to the house,” he said. “Boss is going to kill me if you come back broken.”

“He makes a solid argument there, Seph. It’s easier for you to catch your breath if you’re not moving. It’ll also help him feel less panicked, which will help you feel less panicked. I can see the white swirling in your eyes, but I think it’s from Misha, not you,” Stephen said.

“How?” I asked, as Misha squatted down in front of me so I could hop on his back.

“Everything from you always has heat behind it. Your fear and panic slightly less than other emotions, but it’s still warm. Much warmer than I am. This isn’t warm enough to be from you. You said he runs cooler like I do, so it must be from him,” Stephen said as we continued walking to the house.

“You’re getting better, Yoden,” I said.

He flashed me a grin. “I’ve been thinking about what you told me last night, po. I have ideas,” he said.

I squeezed Misha’s neck a little tighter, asking if he was ready to be a g uinea pig. He turned his head so he could see me out of the corner of his eye. “I just have one question. Do I get pancakes later if I say yes?”

We were still laughing when we got to the house. Adrik was concerned when he saw Misha carrying me back. I knew it wasn’t worth me trying to keep it from him. “I did struggle to catch my breath. I think we might’ve went a little too far this time. Misha helped me out by carrying me back,” I said as Misha deposited me on the kitchen counter. Ivan had walked in right after us, mirroring Adrik’s concern when he saw Misha carrying me.

“I think you’ve done too much this week, princess. You might be overdoing i Ivan said.

“I agree. You’re still at risk for pneumonia again,” Adrik said, handing me a glass of water.

Misha was still somewhat worried and mostly shocked. “I haven’t seen her not be able to catch her breath before. That was alarming.”

“Did you panic?” Adrik asked. “I didn’t feel anything.”

“She didn’t, but Misha did.” Stephen said. “She stayed calm while she worked to catch her breath, but he made her eyes swirl with white because she could feel his panic.”

Adrik looked at me, surprised. “That’s three times now that your eyes have changed in response to someone else and not you.”

“You’re looking at me like I have an answer as to why that is,” I said, trying not to laugh at him.

*Sephie feels everything so much more intensely than the rest of us, it makes sense that her eyes would be more responsive to everything around her as she becomes more responsive to everything around her,” Stephen said.

“Yeah, what he said,” I said, grinning at Adrik. He clicked his tongue as he stepped in front of me, standing between my legs, his hands on my thighs.

“What happened when you felt his panic?” Adrik asked.

“I told him he wasn’t helping.”

“It didn’t make yours worse?” he asked.

“My panic didn’t make an appearance at all. I think it might have if Misha had continued to panic. I could feel that coming on, but once he started carrying me, he calmed down,” I said.

Adrik looked at me thoughtfully. “Good. You’re learning to control it,” he said as he pulled me to the edge of the counter quickly. It made me wrap my legs around him to keep from feeling like I was going to fall. He wrapped one arm around my waist, picking me up off the counter, and walked out of the kitchen with me..

“Okay, bye!” I called out to the guys as we left. We could hear them laughing as we went up the stairs.

It took until Sunday afternoon before Stephen felt ready to try to help Misha with his anger toward Giana. “I might’ve been overanalyzing everything. Try not to be surprised,” Stephen said after they came back.

“And?” I asked, looking between him and Misha. Misha looked even happier than normal.

“I think it worked. I don’t feel anything when I think about Giana now and I couldn’t be happier about that,” Misha said, laughing.

“Was it easy?” I asked Stephen. He had said he felt like he didn’t need anyone help this time for this one. He really had been thinking about it since finding out he’d be able to do it. I was sure he had a complete standard operating procedure written out in his head on what needed to happen.

“Yeah, much easier than breaking a person. I don’t know how much Viktor is carrying around, but I might be able to do it on my own with him too. Misha was easy. It really was just his anger for Giana and nothing else,” Steplan said.

“That’s because he’s too adorable to be bothered by anything else,” I said, grinning at Misha.

I sighed, hopeful that Viktor would get even more relief from the trauma of his past and that it would help him to feel more comfortable around all of us. I wanted all of us to feel comfortable around him as well. I didn’t want to constantly feel irritated when I was around him and I knew the guys didn’t either. One more step in whatever this was that was happening to all of u

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Chapter 446

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Stephen

We’d found a nursing home several hours away from the city to take Armando in. It was nice. It had all the amenities that he was never going to use, but we felt like his money would be put to good use there. I left the penthouse early one morning to deliver him to his new forever home

It was a strange drive to the nursing home. Armando was in the backseat, completely awake, but he never uttered a sound. Since I had broken him, he hadn’t slept. I guess he hadn’t needed to. He just sits in the same position all day, staring blankly in front of him. The guards that were on him would make him he down at night, but they said he’d just lie there, staring at the ceiling all night long.

He would eat, but he needed help to do so. He’d lost weight already since we had him. Most of his muscle was gone by the time I broke him. He looked like a shell of his former self. I would catch myself delighting in that fact often.

Should I feel guilty about being happy that this is how his life turned out?

Maybe.

Did I feel guilty about being happy that this is how his life turned out?

Not one bit.

That’s the beauty of Karma. He brought this on himself. He got a much better end to his life than his buddies Anthony and Lorenzo. I was slightly disappointed and somewhat worried that their souls were going to be returning at some point. I thought about that often.

I wondered how long it took souls to come back in a new body. Would I still be around when Anthony and Lorenzo came back? Would I get a second chance to break them in their next life? Chances are, they were going to make the same mistakes over again. They’d be just as evil in the next life as they were in this one. Maybe I’d be able to find them and break the cycle.

On those days where I caught myself contemplating whether I should feel guilty about Armando’s fate, I tried to remind myself that I really was breaking the cycle. Evil spread. Like a network. One less individual in the network. Get rid of enough individuals in the network and it weakens the entire thing. Anthony, Lorenzo, and Massimo were the beginning of weakening the network. Armando was a bigger blow to the network. The remaining four didn’t stand a chance.

I kept glancing at Armando in the backseat as we got closer to the nursing home. His expression never changed. He never gave any indication that he was aware of anything going on around him. I wondered if this was how my sisters were now. I hadn’t spoken to my parents since my mother called me after my sisters returned home.

I was sure my youngest sister would have been moved back to live with my parents. I was willing to bet good money that my middle sister’s husband would divorce her. I’d never met this one, but I’m sure he wouldn’t want to take care of a catatonic wife for the rest of her life. My oldest sister could talk, but my mother said she barely did. I would often wonder if her condition worsened after she got home. Maybe they were all three with my
parents.

Maybe I felt slightly guilty about burdening my parents with that. But at the same time, I’d tried to tell my mother what was happening. She never listened. She never believed me. They loved my sisters more than me. Even my father. My sisters could get anything they wanted. It was the opposite
for me.

That’s partly why I left home as early as I did. I’d lied about my age so I could join the military early. I just wanted to be away from that house, from my sisters. The military is where I discovered my accuracy in marksmanship. I was always the best shot. It didn’t matter who was at the gun range with me, I hit the mark every single time. I got fast tracked to sn*per school before I even finished my basic training.

For a kid who rarely spoke, becoming a sn*per was like a dream come true. I was already observant, so studying my targets was second nature. I could be patient and wait however long it took until I found the right opportunity. And not a single person ever saw me. It was ideal.

Boss had heard about me and came to me to see if I was looking for a job after I got out of the military. Viktor still had contacts in the military, one of whom was my commanding officer. He knew Viktor had a sweet deal with Boss, even without knowing the details. There were lots of military guys that wanted to get into private security after they got out. Boss explained his situation, gave me his card, and told me to call him when I got out.

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I didn’t want to go back home, so the day after I got out of the military, I gave him a call. He flew me to the city, told me to give him a month to see if it would work out on both sides, and I haven’t been home since.

The other guys were welcoming from the start. They didn’t care that I was quiet. They let me keep to myself as much as I wanted. I showed up to work each day. That’s what they cared about. I was more comfortable with them by the time Sephie came into our lives, but it’s really because of her that I’m as close to them as I am now.)

Everything changed when she came into the picture. In the best way possible.

I tried to keep her at arm’s length for as long as possible. She recognized that I was the loner type. She didn’t care either. I kept waiting for her to turn mean and sa*istic, like my sisters, but it never happened. Instead, she would hype me up anytime I said anything around her. She wanted to hear my opinion. She laughed at my jokes. She made me feel like I was part of the group, for the first time in my life.

I wasn’t sure if she knew how much she meant to me, but she brought me back from the brink of destruction. It was a daily battle to keep the anger and the pure rage from taking over. I was so close to giving in and just becoming the monster that my sisters tried to create. But then we all met Sephie and we learned about what she’d had to endure in her short life. I saw how bright her light still shined, despite everything that had happened to her.

If she could do it, why couldn’t I?

I’m not sure she would ever know the role she played in my life, but I knew I would do everything in my power to make sure she was always safe and she was always protected. No matter what.

I glanced back at Armando, who was still blankly staring ahead, as we pulled into the driveway of the nursing home. “We’re here, di**k.”

I was going to have to watch myself and make sure I didn’t say his new name with that tone in front of anyone inside…..

I was greeted by an administrator, as well as a nurse when we pulled up. They were expecting di*k. We had called and given his fake back story already. It was tragic, really. His dear wife, whom he loved with all his heart, died tragically in a freak accident while on vacation a few years ago. She was such a bubbly personality and he just adored listening to her tell stories and talk endlessly about every little detail of her life. After she passed, he couldn’t stand the silence. He turned to drugs to try and fill the void and it caused him to have a massive stroke. The doctors said the damage was extensive and he would never recover. He’d remain in a waking coma for the rest of his life.

They had his room all set up for him, with his new roomie just dying to meet him. She’d been so lonely without anyone to talk to that she’d been telling the nurses all week how excited she was to get someone to talk to. I met her. She was a dear woman. Talked my ear off for twenty minutes. while they got paperwork for me to sign. It was going to be the absolute best end to Armando’s life that any of us could’ve conceived.

Before I left, I leaned down to Armando’s ear whispering, “next time, if someone tells you to jump off the roof, you should do so.”

I can’t be sure, but I think he flinched.

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Sephle

Vitaliy had finally furnished his new house, which was Armando's old house, and had been there for a week. He invited all of us over for dinner the day that Stephen took Armando to the mursing home, as a hit of a celebration, Like we were going to say no to that…

Battista had come back to the city the day before, so he joined us for dinner. He had information on Ricardo and the other three bosses for us, as well as more information on the police commissioner. He was proving to be quite the asset for us.

I'd never been to Vitaliy's house when it was still Armando's house, so this was a bit of an adventure for me. I did make sure to tell him to check all the windows on the first floor before he moved in, just in case. You can never be too careful.

Vitaliy greeted us warmly when we arrived, his smile that showed up quite often now spreading across his face when we walked in. "Sladkaya, I'm happy to see you," he said, opening his arms for me.

"I've missed you, old man," I said, hugging him. I turned to Battista, who had been standing next to Vitaliy. "Battista, it's good to see you again, as well." He took my hand, flipping it over to kiss the back of it, like normal.

"Sephie, it's always a pleasure," he said. He had a devious glint to his eye that made me think he wanted something.

"Out with it, Battista. Who do you need help with?" I asked.

He looked at Vitaliy, who was laughing. He didn't say anything, but he reached into his pocket, pulling out a money clip that was holding a w*d of hundred dollar bills. He counted off five and handed them to Vitaliy, folding the rest back up and putting them back in his pocket. He turned back to me, smiling. "Another business associate I'm unsure about. They'll be here in five days," he said.

"Another woman?" I asked. Adrik was behind me as I greeted Vitaliy and Battista both, but he had pulled me against him when he heard Battista needed me for something.

Battista shook his head no. "Not a woman this time. This guy has been influential in Europe for years, but there's something about him that many people don't like. Only, no one knows why. Vitaliy has met him before, but it's been years. He didn't feel anything off about him then, but the feeling has persisted. You," he said, then paused to look at Adrik and the guys before continuing, "all of you, offer a much more detailed picture. When Ricardo goes down, I have a feeling he's only the first domino. I would like to have those who are connected to me completely vetted before that happens."

"She doesn't go anywhere without all of us," Adrik said, pulling me tighter against him.

"Nor would I want her to. I value all of your insights. I still don't know the specifics of how you're all connected, but I know you are. If this associate can pass this test, then I won't need to worry about them," Battista said.

"Let us know when and where, then," Adrik said.

The conversation turned to small talk. I asked Vitaliy for a tour of the house, since I'd never been there. He gladly obliged, taking my hand and sliding it through his arm as he walked me around the house. I could tell it made the guys slightly itchy to let me go with him alone, but they did.

"How's Ilya working out?" I asked once we were alone.

He exhaled loudly. "Much better than the little flowers. I didn't realize how much I'd come to despise them until they were gone. He told me his training was not where it should be, but he's quite good already. It won't take any time to catch him up. Most importantly, he wishes to be caught up." He looked down at me, a sly grin on his face. "You inspired him, sladkaya," he said.

"Shut up. When?"

"He saw you with Ivan. He remembers Ivan from when he was younger. He said he wished to be able to hold his own against Ivan as well as you did the other day."

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I laughed. "Ivan still takes it very easy on me, Vitaliy. He shouldn't be that impressed."

He clicked his tongue. "I've seen Ivan fight plenty of times. You made him work. You're very fast."

"Not as fast as I was. I'm still trying to get it back, but it's coming."

"Keep training like you did the other day and Ivan won't have to hold back at all with you," he said, patting my hand as we continued our house tour.

Once we were back with everyone else, Battista filled us in on what he'd found out about Ricardo and the other three bosses.

"We don't know exactly when yet, but Niko and Vito, are planning on returning to the city. We don't even know exactly why they're returning to the city, but we think it's because the underbosses have stopped collecting the taxes in their absence. They're running short of cash," Battista said.

"The underbosses have been keeping very low profiles," Ivan said. "They heard what happened to Anthony, Lorenzo, and Massimo. They're scared."

"They also know no one has seen Armando or Dario in months. The rumors abound about what happened to those two," Stephen said.

"You have them both, no?" Battista asked. Adrik simply nodded his head, which kept the rest of us from saying anything further.

"We have eyes on all of them, so when Niko and Vito leave, we'll be able to notify you. I'm not sure if you want to pick them up at the airport or let them come back to the city," Battista said.

Adrik was quiet for a moment, which meant he was weighing his options. "If we let them come back to the city, it might lull them into a false sense of security. We can also see just how loyal those underbosses are going to be. My guess is not that loyal, given that they've all taken a vacation while the bosses have been away. Might be fun to crush them a little bit before we grab them," Ivan said.

"What are your plans for them? Same as Armando?" Vitaliy asked.

I could feel Adrik's anger, just under the surface, as he thought about what to do with Niko and Vito. Battista didn't know about his eyes changing or Ivan's eyes changing yet. Tonight might be the night he found out.

He looked to me, asking for my thoughts. Instead of saying anything, I just thought about Stephen breaking Niko and Vito the same way he did. Armando. I saw the look on Adrik's face that meant my eyes had changed to purple. It was half enchantment, half disappointment. He looked back at his father, nodding his head once.

"Where are you at with the mayor? That could help determine your plan for Niko and Vito," Battista asked.

"He's currently looking through most of what we have on Ricardo. We kept back some of it until we know for sure he's willing to move on it. We told him we have Dr. Moretti. He was going to meet with his DA to see what they could actually charge him with. Since no one but Sephie can remember him, it's difficult to charge him there. There's also no evidence that he's the one that created brawn, past what Sal's security guy told us. I'm not turning him over if he's going to walk free," Adrik said.

"We checked out the DA. He's also good. At least for now. If there's a way to charge him, he'd be willing to do so." Battista thought for a minute more, adding, "perhaps we can help them find evidence that will hold up in court. Has anyone been to Sal's house since he left

"No. He's still got security there, the last time we checked. But I can't say I wouldn't like to go take a look to see what we could find," Viktor said.

"How much security? Can you guys get past it?" Battista asked. "I only ask because I know Ricardo likes to keep records. If Sal has been working with him, then he will also like to keep records. What we're looking for could very well be in his house."

"I'll have a team check it out in the morning." Viktor said. "Depending on how many guys he has on the house, we might be able to get in and get out without anyone knowing."

Misha clapped his hands together. "I love breaking and entering."

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Sephle

Three days after we met with Battista, we were all on our way to break into Sal's house in the middle of the night. He did have security on his house, but it was minimal. Our guys watching the house said the night shift would usually fall asleep, if they showed up at all, so it should be an easy endeavor to slip into the house undetected. We were only interested in his files and his office happened to be all the way at the end of the house, which made it easy for us.

We decided everyone should go, to make it easier to look through all the files in a shorter amount of time. We weren't exactly sure how many files we were going to be looking at. Because Adrik had promised me that he was never sending me away from him again, it meant I was going to break the law with the rest of them.

I couldn't say I was disappointed about being included in this little adventure. Any chance I could get to stick it to Sal would make me very happy.

I had strict orders to stay with Adrik or Ivan at all times. Like I would argue with that.

We left the vehicles down the block from his house and went the rest of the way on foot. The team that had scouted the house ahead of time told us where the security was supposed to be. We found them inside the house, watching TV. They clearly took their jobs very seriously.

Adrik was the one that snuck in the house, silently walking right by the security team on the couch, and unlocked the window to the office for the rest of us to come in. The security team never suspected a thing. We ran to the end of the house, two at a time, until we were all in the office. Stephen kept an eye on the hallway, Viktor kept an eye on the window, the rest of us quickly looked through files for anything we could find that would tie Dr. Moretti to the creation of brawn and/or Sal.

As I was looking through files, I felt Stephen get tense. Before he could say anything, I told Ivan and Adrik silently, "Stephen noticed something in the hallway." Ivan was next to him immediately. Stephen signaled what he'd heard, then the two of them disappeared. We heard the faintest sounds of a quick commotion, then nothing. Then Stephen and Ivan appeared in the office once more.

"We need to hurry. They'll eventually wonder where their buddy is and come looking for him. There's a bedroom down the hall. We put him in the bed, hoping to buy us some time. He's going to be sleeping for a while anyway." Ivan said to me and Adrik. I looked at Andrei, tapping my temple. I relayed the message to him, so he could relay the message to Misha. We all continued looking without a word spoken.

"Got it," Adrik said. He kept flipping through the file in his hands. "Battista was right. Sal kept detailed records. This is everything on Dr. Moretti. This should be enough to put him away."

I caught Andrei's eye, telling him we found what we needed. We quickly exited out the window, two at a time, and left Adrik to close and lock the window behind us and once again walk right past the security team on the couch. We waited for Adrik to join us and we were back at the vehicles. The entire process took just over an hour.

On the way back to the penthouse, Adrik said silently, "having you as the go-between for Andrei, Misha, and Stephen was very helpful. We've never not had to talk to each other before." He put his arm around me, pulling me to him. "And you caught on that Stephen knew something right away. That could've been much uglier." He looked at me, his s*xy smirk on his face. "You're quite handy to have around. I think I'll keep you."

Viktor let Chen know that we had new information for the mayor once we were back at the penthouse. He knew to stop by in the morning to get it before going to the mayor's house to get his crew started for the day.

"I think we should find a way to meet with the DA. Or at least get Andrei and Ivan to watch him and see if they can see anything on him," Stephen

said.

I agree. I was thinking about that on the way back," Viktor said. "I don't know how easy it would be to meet with the DA though."

"Maybe he needs his house renovated too," I said, grinning.

"I think it would be a good idea to meet with the mayor in person, as well, before we give him everything. What we have so far is promising, but I would feel better seeing him in person and having Sephie be able to see him speak," Adrik said.

"We just need to be careful on who sees that happening. We don't want Henry to catch on that we're working with the mayor," Ivan said.

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"Well, apparently he's not that quick since he didn't notice that two of his police chiefs were meeting with the mayor in the same place where they met with him not two days prior," I said. "We could meet with the mayor at the hotel and apparently no one but Mr. Turner would notice:

Adrik chuckled. "You're not wrong, solnishko. I'll see if Neal can come up with a reason that we should meet with the mayor.

"There's that giant fundraiser for the hospital coming up in a few weeks. You usually don't go, but maybe you should go this time. The mayor will be there, as will the DA. As will Henry," Viktor said.

Adrik could feel my moment of panic as I thought about going to another black tie affair. I managed to get it mostly under control before he made across the room to me. I sighed. "If any one of you so much as walks too far away from me while we're there, I swear on all things holy, I will kill you," I said, pinching the bridge of my nose.

The

stayed silent. They could feel my turmoil. They still struggled with guilt from the last time. I felt Adrik's arms around me as he pulled me gently to him. He ran his hand through my hair, saying, "we don't have to go, love. I hate those functions anyway. We can find another way to meet with the mayor. I don't want to put you through that."

I took a deep breath. "It's really the easiest option. It might also be the fastest option. No one will think twice about you having a conversation with the mayor if you're there," I said, chewing on my lip. "Aren't you the biggest donor to the hospital anyway? They'll be happy you're there. The mayor should thank you for being there, which is all the more reason for you to have a conversation with him." I looked up at him. "I'll be okay. You and Ivan need contacts though."

Misha and Stephen both scoffed. "Why do you always have to ruin all the fun, gazelle?" Misha asked.

King of the Linderworld

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 449

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Sephie

We arrived at the hotel where Mr. Turner worked to meet with Battista and his associates, once again like modern-day royalty. Vitaliy was with us, as were all his guys, minus the little flowers. I watched Ilya as he was working. He fit in perfectly with Vitaliy's other guys. He was considerably younger than the rest of them, but he knew exactly what to do, exactly when to do it. They worked together like they'd been a team for years, rather than weeks. I caught his eye as we were walking up to the front door of the hotel, he smiled broadly at me, then went right back to boss mode. It made me happy to see him happy. His light had stayed just as bright as it was since Stephen scared off the darkness hanging around him.

Vitaliy's other guys were almost happier to be rid of the little flowers than Vitaliy was. It meant they could come to dinner with him again. Apparently the way to all of these men's hearts was through their stomachs.

As we approached the door to the hotel, we were greeted by Mr. Turner, who was just as happy as always to see us. I stepped away from Adrik, to give Mr. Turner a hug before we continued inside. Battista was waiting on us in the empty restaurant, like usual. He was standing with three men this time. I couldn't help but feel relief when I saw there was no woman with them. While the guys were usually very serious while they were working. I heard them all laugh quietly when they felt my relief at seeing Battista standing with only men.

"Not gonna lie, princess, I might've enjoyed watching you embarrass that woman the last time a little too much," Ivan said silently.

Before I could answer him, Adrik responded, "Let it play out, Ivan. We both know she's equal opportunity. If this guy deserves it, it'll be just as glorious as the woman." He looked down at me, smirking, as we continued the rest of the way to Battista.

"This is the first time I've regretted being able to hear both of your thoughts," I said. I could hear both of them laughing in my head, but outwardly, they looked as serious as ever. They were really getting good at this.

I caught Andrei's eye as Battista was making the introductions with Vitaliy. He let me see what he saw when he looked at the men with Battista. I felt Misha's nausea coming on, but I couldn't tell which one it was from right away. I just knew it was one of them that was making Misha nauseous.

"Ivan? Anything?" I asked.

"Definitely. Short guy on the end. I saw it as we walked up. It's stepped back, though," he said.

"Same guy

Andrei pointed out. Misha confirms it, too."

Stephen and I had discussed our options before we came to the hotel. If there was a situation like we had with Ilya, where the demon wasn't necessarily attached, we would signal to him to speak to see if he could scare it away. If the demon was already attached, it was going to be slightly more complicated. We would wait to reveal who he was until a little later. Since we didn't have much experience, we were hoping to gain some knowledge on how they would react to us.

Battista motioned for Adrik to meet his associates. He didn't let go of me as he went to greet them. The first two men were fine when he shook their hands. The last man, the one that everyone had pointed out, made Adrik feel nauseous when he shook his hand. Because he was still touching me, I could feel what he felt.

Ivan's bubble went up around me as I went through the line, shaking everyone's hands as well. I wasn't worried about our eyes changing since we now all had contacts in, but this time was different. I knew our eyes were black, even without seeing them. It felt similar to the agitation we felt around Viktor, but stronger. Our demons were itchy.

Battista took my hand, flipping it over to kiss the back of it, as he always did. As he looked up, he raised an eyebrow, silently asking if there was anything to be worried about as everyone else moved toward the table. I nodded once, discreetly. He looked almost excited as we walked to the table.

The business associates of Battista had come to the city under the guise of investing in various projects throughout the city. None of these projects were real, but Adrik, Vitaliy, and Battista discussed them as if they were. I stayed quiet, watching everyone as they talked with each other. I felt nothing bad from two associates, but I could tell the third one was watching us just as carefully as we were watching him.

Andrei caught my eye, telling me that the guy was focused on me, Adrik, and Ivan. "He knows there's something different about you three, but he can't figure out what, too."

"Ivan told me his demon stepped back when we first got here. Can you feel it?" I asked.

"Yeah, it's the same as that woman before. Not cold, I mean. But it's there, whether it's in control or not. It's definitely there."

"I'm so impressed that you can feel that now, Bubba," I said, winking at him when no one was looking. "How's Misha? Tell him to stop looking at the guy. I can feel his nausea when he does."

Andrei coughed once to keep from laughing, then I saw him have a silent conversation with Misha. Misha caught my eye, grinning at me. Stephen was quiet, as was Viktor. Since we hadn't figured out a way to communicate with Stephen yet, he was mostly on his own, but he could still feel what I felt. I was certain he had felt both Misha's nausea, as well as Adrik's when it came to the one business associate we'd singled out. He was staying quiet, for now. Doing what he did best. Watching. Waiting.

The conversation shifted from business to more benign subjects. The three men were from different areas in western Europe. In an effort to keep the conversation going. I asked questions about where they were from, capitalizing on the dumb woman stereotype. They indulged me, happy to answer my questions.

"Are your demons getting itchy?" Ivan asked.

"The whole time we've been here," Adrik answered.

"He's focused on the three of us. He knows there's something different about us, but he doesn't know what yet. What can you see, Ivan?" I asked.

Instead of describing what he saw when he looked at the man, he pushed a snapshot to both me and Adrik. We could see the man, but we could also see the demon, just behind his face. Like a demonic shadow.

"That was impressive," Adrik said.

"Show off." I said, trying not to laugh.

"What are we going to do with him?" Ivan asked. It was a good question. Battista had told us he simply wanted to know if there was a reason to be wary of this man. We had plenty of reasons to be wary of him. I ended up asking Vitaliy, in Russian, if any of these men spoke Italian. He shook his head no, then looked at everyone like I had just reminded him of a funny story related to the topic they were all discussing. As he finished up his pretend story, I looked at Battista, asking him in Italian how far he wanted us to take this.

Without s*ipping a beat, he answered me quickly in Italian and then followed Vitaliy's lead, making up a reason for me to be speaking Italian to him. None of them were any the wiser.

"He said he wants him exposed; however we need to make that happen. He said the other two know enough that they won't freak out," I told Ivan and Adrik.

"We need to ditch the contacts, then," Ivan said.

"Agreed," Adrik responded.

I leaned over, whispering to Adrik, "would you gentlemen like to escort me to the restroom?" He stood up, extending his hand to me. He looked at Ivan, who stood up with us as well. He excused us, walking toward the back of the restaurant. I gave Andrei a quick update as we were leaving.

They surprised me by coming into the women's bathroom with me. I couldn't help but laugh at them. "This is some weird porn fantasy right here," I said, walking to the sink so I could take my contacts out.

Ivan groaned when he took his out. "I understand why your eyes have been so itchy, princess. I do not want to wear these things any longer than I absolutely have to."

"You do get used to them," I said. "But I still don't like wearing them for extended periods."

We all looked at each other, our eyes turning black immediately. We couldn't keep from laughing at each other.

"I think we unlocked a new level. I've never noticed my demon get this itchy before when we've been around another demon. I don't know what that means," Adrik said. "It kind of worries me."

I thought for a minute, trying to get a sense of what was going on. "I don't think we're the ones that should be worried about it. I think they're trying to help us more as each new thing happens. It feels like mine is trying to tell me something." I said.

"New level for sure," Ivan said, grinning at me. "So, what's the plan for this dude?"

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Sephie

“From what you’ve seen, he’s pretty much consumed by the demon, right?” I asked Ivan.

“Yeah. When they’re like the face behind the face, that’s when they’re running the show,” Ivan said,

I looked at Adrik. He had the same thought I did. “There’s only one solution, then,” he said.

“Stephen,” we all said at the same time.

“He’s going to be so happy,” I said, laughing as we left the bathroom.

When we got back to the table, the conversation was still flowing. Everyone noticed as we came back, but we didn’t interrupt anything. As we sat down, I told both Ivan and Adrik to either close their eyes or look down. I turned toward Stephen, who was sitting beside me, and flashed him my demon eyes. He knew that meant his services were going to be needed shortly.

We’d discussed Stephen’s gift before coming to the hotel. Before, we had personal experiences to use as fuel for him to break the person. This person was a complete stranger, so we weren’t sure how that would work. It was Misha that came up with the idea for how to make it work.

“Once the decision is made, I can look back through the person’s life and pick out times when they’ve done evil things. You and Andrei can look through their head and do the same. I can send everything I have to Andrei, he can send it to you, you give it to Stephen. Boss can give him “f*ck you” juice like before while Ivan makes sure you’re protected,” Misha had said the night before as we were discussing it.

I gave the green light to both Misha and Andrei to start collecting information. They’d both been working on being more subtle with their gifts. It was harder to tell when they were using them now. The glazed-over look was much less noticeable.

As the three of us looked into this man’s life, none of us were prepared for what we found. Adrik and Ivan both felt my extreme nausea, which was compounded with both Misha and Andrei’s nausea as they saw what I saw.

“What’s happening, love? You feel terrible,” Adrik asked.

“I’m going to need to wash my brain after this. This man is beyond disgusting.”I told them. “You might not need to help Stephen. This one is going to hit very close to home for him. It’s going to send him into a rage.”

The man had a very long history of taking advantage of little boys in the worst way possible. We collected enough of his memories that Stephen would have plenty to use. I told Andrei and Misha to stop, mostly because I couldn’t handle the nausea any longer.

“I need to warn Stephen,” I said. “But we need to find a way to provoke him so everyone can see.”

While they tried to come up with a strategy to provoke the man, I leaned over to Stephen. I was very careful not to touch him yet. I whispered in his ear, in Russian, “Yoden, I need to warn you. This one is going to be difficult for you because of what he’s done. It hits very close to home for you. If you want to sit this one out, we can find another way.”

Before I could stop him, he grabbed my hand. He managed to control himself as he took everything we’d gotten from that guy’s life. It only took a few seconds. He looked at me, saying, “there’s absolutely no way in Hell I would sit this one out.”

Andrei caught my eye, after he’d watched Stephen take everything from me. His face clearly showed concern for Stephen. He pushed his thoughts to me, telling me he’d figured out another piece to the puzzle. He suddenly realized that Viktor was here to help us as much as he was to help others. He could help us fix ourselves after we’d had to witness the evil this man had done over his lifetime. None of us wanted this hanging onto us any longer than absolutely necessary.

I told Andrei he was a f*cking genius.

“Stephen is ready, whenever we are. I’m not sure he’s going to need help, but I think you should be ready, Just in case. I can feel him smoldering beside me right now. He’s usually very cold, but he feels like you do normally right now,” I told Adrik.

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“I can feel him through you. I know that feeling from him. He’ll handle this one on his own,” Adrik said.

Once again, I spoke to Battista in Italian, telling him we needed a way to provoke this man to anger so we could expose him. He nodded, expertly shifting the conversation exactly in the direction we needed. Since Lorenzo had been killed, many of his human trafficking networks throughout Europe had been exposed. There were a few very high profile people that had been caught having connections to Lorenzo, meaning they were partaking in the particular services that Lorenzo was providing. Battista must’ve had his suspicions about this man before today, as I couldn’t see him bringing this subject up otherwise.

The man started to get uncomfortable as we all discussed the matter. He started to sweat when Battista had asked if he’d known one of the people that was currently in police custody for being connected to Lorenzo. Nothing had been outright proven yet, but speculation as to this person’s guilt was running rampant throughout Europe. The man before us decided that coming to the defense of an accused human trafficker and ped*phile was his best option.

It was exactly what we needed.

The conversation got heated on his end, but he wasn’t angry per se. He was scared. Scared of the same fate. Scared of being exposed.

I felt my anger rise to the surface and I finally let it happen, not caring one bit that my eyes were now black. Adrik and Ivan’s eyes were also now black. We watched him squirm in his seat once he saw it. Ivan shared what he could see with me and Adrik. The demon was clearly agitated. I glanced at Stephen, who finally spoke.

“I mean no disrespect, sir, but people are generally only accused of such heinous acts when they’ve actually participated in such heinous acts,” he said. I’d never heard Stephen take that tone with anyone before. It was like he was mocking him. In the most menacing way possible. If I didn’t know Stephen already, it would’ve sent chills down my spine.

Ivan was still sharing what he could see as Stephen revealed himself. We watched this man lose complete control. His demon was now angry and took over, switching his eyes to black as well. The man tried to get up, but Stephen stood up quickly. Stephen was across the table from him, but it looked like Stephen had grabbed him and shoved him back into his seat, without Stephen touching him. He didn’t move after that. His body was completely paralyzed, but Stephen had only barely begun break him. He could still talk; he could still see.

Stephen was s*ipping ahead to advanced levels of control already.

The demon started trying to talk his way out of it, making sick excuses, promising power, promising whatever we wanted. Surprisingly, Stephen let him talk for a few minutes. He glanced at Battista and his associates. Battista didn’t look quite as shocked as his other two associates. He’d definitely had his suspicions before today about this man.

Finally, Stephen had enough. I felt his anger level go through the roof as we watched the man’s light behind his eyes go out. He finally stopped talking as Stephen gave everything back to him that he’d done to his victims. All the pain, all the trauma, all the suffering he’d caused was now given back to him all at once, effectively breaking his psyche.

Adrik’s anger was definitely not needed in this instance. Stephen had plenty of his own this time. Once he was finished, his anger disappeared and he went back to feeling his normal, colder than any human should be self. He sat back down and took a sip of water like this was a normal f*cking

Tuesday.

“Vlad is going to be so impressed with your portfolio, Yoden,” I said quietly to him, in Russian.

He laughed quietly.

I looked at Battista and his associates, who were still somewhat shocked at what they’d just witnessed. “You all heard him tell you everything you needed to know about him in his own words. He was consumed by his demon. He has been for a very long time. He did very bad things to very innocent people and now he’ll be made to suffer for that for the rest of his body’s life.”

“He’s going to stay like that until he dies?” one of Battista’s associates asked. I nodded my head, explaining what we’d done.

Battista turned to the man, saying, “this is why we’re all so willing to help them get Ricardo De Luca. Do you understand now? And more importantly, are you willing to help?”

It became clear in that moment why Battista had set this up today. It wasn’t for his benefit, but for ours.

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King of the Underworld

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 451

451

Adrik

I was concerned about Sephie and the Wonder Twins. They'd been very quiet both on the way hack to the penthouse and since we'd been back. Sephie refused to show me what they'd all seen. Stephen, to his credit, seemed to be handling it better than those three.

Sephie managed to learn a new trick, where she shut me out completely. I could barely feel her and I couldn't see anything in her head. I couldn't
even talk to her.

“Okay, I won't look. I promise. Just please stop whatever it is you're doing to shut me out,” I said to her as we were all in the kitchen. She still wouldn't look at me, but she at least let me feel what she was feeling again.

“How did you do that, princess? You've never been able to turn everything else off before,” Ivan asked.

“She doesn't want you knowing what we saw,” Andrei said. Even he looked incredibly troubled. Misha hadn't said a word in over an hour either. It was likely a record for him.

“I'm not being a s*it. You don't need to see any of it. Trust me,” she said. She looked at Andrei, asking, “what was your idea at the hotel again? We need help getting rid of this. I'm not gonna be able to handle this for very long and you two aren't either.”

I could feel her anxiety slowly increasing, but I could also feel all of her emotions were just completely out of control. She was fighting hard to keep it as contained as possible, but this was not a battle she would be able to keep up for very long. I pulled her to me, surprised to feel her body shaking. I looked at Andrei, hoping he had a solution for this.

“Please tell me you figured out a solution. We just got rid of the shaking and now it's back,” I said, my hands rubbing her back lightly, trying to help keep her calm.

Andrei glanced at Viktor, then to Stephen. “I think Viktor is here to help us as much as he is to help other people. If we're going to be a witness to all the atrocities in the world, we're going to need help. I think Stephen can help us get rid of it, Viktor can help us heal from it and make sure we're not vulnerable. I think Stephen gets the worst of it out of all of us, especially if we dump everything on him to get rid of, so I think Viktor needs to concentrate on him first.”

“How did you help Misha get rid of his anger, Stephen? What do you do with it if you don't send it back to the person?” Ivan asked.

Stephen laughed quietly. “It's a bit of a process, but I think I can get faster at it. You might think I'm crazy if I explain it in detail.”

“Try us,” I said.

He looked at me, somewhat skeptically, but started to explain. “Emotions are just energy, right? Some of the time, when we struggle with emotions, it's because they're stuck in our body. This is why acupuncture works so well, especially for Sephie. It opens all the channels so her emotions can flow freely. It's what helped her master her control. If your emotions are flowing, you're feeling them the way you should be feeling them. They're meant to come and go, not stay. We're all so used to being stuck, whether it's in anger, sadness, trauma, whatever, that we feel Sephie and we're suddenly overwhelmed because her emotions are doing what ours should be. Once again, she's showing us what we should be doing, instead of what we are doing. She lets her emotions flow through her like water. Just like any body of water, you want to keep it moving. When it stagnates, that's where the issues come in. When I took Misha's anger, it wasn't as much about removing the anger altogether. It was more about removing what was blocking it so it could flow through him once more.” He paused, looking at all of us like he was unsure if he should continue. He inhaled deeply, deciding to continue. “There's a little more to this level up than any of us realized. I'm not sure if it's ever going to work with anyone else outside this room, but I just had to touch Misha to figure out why he was struggling with his anger toward Giana. Remove that, everything flows again.”

Sephie, who had her head leaned against my chest, stood up and turned toward Stephen. “Misha saw the younger version of himself that was quick to judge people in Giana and it irritated him.” She immediately looked at Misha, apologizing. “Sometimes I can't control my mouth.”

He grinned at her. “It's okay, gazelle. You're 100% right. Stephen didn't even have to tell me anything when it happened. Whatever he did, I had the

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“I think I have a theory on that one, too. And I think Andrei is correct in that this is where Viktor comes in for all of us. Because of the subject matter that none of us were expecting today, you three instinctively tried to protect yourselves and Sephie tried to protect everyone since we're all connected to her. Essentially, you shut yourselves down to try and feel safe. It's completely understandable and it's a completely normal response. I lived that way for years, to be quite honest, I think you're still shut down, still trying to protect yourselves which is why you feel like s*it and why Sephie doesn't want us to feel her and doesn't want anyone in her head right now. The dam needs to be broken, if you will. Then Viktor can repair what was damaged today. I also think before we do this again, you three need a tune up from him before we go. I think that'll help next time,” Stephen said.

“What about you, though? Did you see everything we gave you today?” Sephie asked.

“I did. I see it each time, but I also think I can recognize that it's not mine: It might be easier for me since I'm already concentrating on sending everything back to the person. I don't get stuck like you three have. I think that's where the problem lies,” Stephen said.

“I think Viktor should fix you anyway,” Sephie said. “You're not going to be everyone's dumping grounds.”

Viktor, who had been quiet until this point finally spoke up. “I think Stephen and Andrei are both right. If you're going to be seeing the worst side of humanity all the time, you're going to need help. Just like it doesn't make sense that Stephen would break half the world's population, I don't think it makes sense for me to go around fixing half the world's population either. I don't like people that much. I think you guys are there for the heavy lifting. I'm there to make sure you're in top shape to do the heavy lifting.”

Sephie and Stephen looked at each other, then both looked at Viktor. “You still have your own issues that you need Stephen's help with, too. If you help us, he helps you,” Sephie said, sternly. She was starting to feel grumpy the longer she carried around whatever it was she got from Battista's associate today.

Thankfully, Viktor didn't protest.

“Good. Let's do this now, then. I'm not happy that she feels like she wants to shut me out. Someone make that go away before I get angry,” I said, pulling her against me once more.

King of the Underworld

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Adrik

Stephen stood in front of me and Sephie. I could feel she was still unsure about letting him help her. She wouldn't look at him for a few moments. Finally, he said, "I promise it won't affect me, Seph. I think Viktor can help me get rid of it, in the off chance that it does.*

"Let him try, love. Anything is better than what you're feeling right now. We all know this isn't you. We would all like you to come back," I said.

She finally turned toward Stephen. "What do you need me to do?" she asked.

"Nothing. Just give me your hands. I'll do the rest," he said.

She timidly held her hands in front of her for him to take. He smiled at her. "Promise it won't hurt," he said, as he took her hands in his.

It didn't look like anything was happening, but we could all feel what she was feeling. As soon as Stephen grabbed her hands, I could feel the intense pressure. She'd never struggled so much to control her emotions, but Stephen was right. It was because she was trying to contain them, not control them. In trying to prevent them from flowing through her to us, she stopped everything and that was more than any one person should ever try to contain. I could see the small smile on Stephen's face as he found what he was looking for. Gradually, the pressure decreased, like a pressure release valve being slowly opened.

We could feel her emotions come at us like a tidal wave. One right after the other hit us, wave after wave, crashing into us. But as soort as the emotions hit us, they were gone. What was left was the normal connection I had with her. I could feel everything she was feeling like normal. Stephen said something to her, but I was too busy trying to look in her head to hear it.

"You're not shutting me out anymore," I said to her, almost giddy that I could talk to her again. I could hear her laughing in her head, but she looked like she was talking to Stephen and watching him move to Andrei. "Don't ever do that again," I said, probably more seriously than I meant to given her reaction.

She turned toward me, her eyes black, and told me, "I will do it again if it means protecting you from seeing what I had to witness today. There are things in life that no one should ever have to see." She crossed her arms across her chest, her anger preventing her from coming any closer to me. I wasn't quite sure, but I could almost swear that even her demon was angry with me at the moment. Something felt different.

Ivan chuckled, having witnessed our silent exchange. He could feel Sephie's anger and knew I'd likely said something to bring it out. "Stephen fixed her. She's all s*icy and s*it again," Ivan said.

Misha clapped his hands, rubbing his palms together. "Extra-sp*cy Sephie is my favorite!"

I finally gave in and pulled her to me, whether she wanted me to or not. I didn't like being cut off from her. As soon as my arms were around her, she silently said, "I hated cutting you off as much as you hated being cut off, but you still didn't need to feel any of that. Or worse, see it. We're going to need a warning from Battista next time."

I could feel a wave of sadness from her. She still had her arms crossed in front of her, so I unfolded them and put her arms around my waist so I could hold her closer. I felt her body start to relax the longer she was in my arms. "I love you, Sephie." She sighed, holding me tighter, hiding her face in my chest as I watched Stephen help Misha and Andrei the same way he helped her.

After Stephen was done with Misha, it was Viktor's turn. Misha asked, "can you fix all of us at one time? Is there like a limit on how much you can do at once?"

"I don't think there's a limit. It's not really me doing it anyway. Kostya does it. He just uses me when he does," Viktor said.

"Does it zap you when he uses you though?" Misha asked.

"Not the same way, I don't think. It doesn't last nearly as long. I might be tired for twenty minutes, then I feel fine," he said.

"How do I sign up for that," Misha said under his breath.

"Can Kostya fix you again after Stephen helps you?" Andrei asked. "Is there a limit to how many times a person can be fixed? I'm looking at you, Misha," he said, trying not to laugh.

"As far as I know, there's not a limit. Your aura is a part of you. It's an extension of your energy field. As long as you're alive, your aura will be there and will be repairable to some extent. I think you can reach a point where it's past the point of saving. Like, I'm sure I would've been useless for that guy today," Viktor said.

"Do you want to see what Andrei saw? His aura was almost non-existent," Sephie said. Viktor hesitated. She turned toward him, moving slightly away from me. "Andrei only sees auras. It's Ivan that sees demons. I haven't shown Andrei what Ivan saw yet. You won't see anything you don't want to see," she said. "He can show you, even. Misha can help him, the same way he helped me."

Viktor was more agreeable to Andrei showing him than Sephie. He really was terrified of our demons. Andrei, however, was much more skeptical that he could show Viktor what he sees than Sephie was.

She laughed quietly at him. "You can show him, Bubba. It's the same as with everyone else, it just takes a little longer. You need to concentrate a little harder. Do you want a snack first?" she asked, grinning at him.

"I hate you," Andrei said, walking to Viktor. He couldn't hide his smile as he walked past her.

"Not me. I love you," Misha said, wrapping his arms around her and picking her up quickly before joining Andrei and Viktor. Misha was needed for Sephie to show Viktor before, so it was very likely he was also going to be needed for Andrei.

Andrei tried for a few minutes, but couldn't get it through to Viktor. Misha grabbed his hand, giving him the extra boost he needed. It was almost immediate, once Misha helped, that Viktor saw what Andrei could see that afternoon. While they were sharing it with Viktor, Sephie motioned for Stephen to come to her. She grabbed his hand, showing him the same thing that Viktor was seeing. She shared it with me and Ivan at the same time she showed Stephen. There was barely anything to look at. What faint outline we could see was dim and greyish in color, with very dark spots s*attered throughout.

"Yeah, someone like him is going to get no benefit from me," Viktor said. He looked at Sephie like he was slightly unsure. "Honestly, I'm not sure how much I can help you, Sephie. I don't know how it works with your demon." His tone was definitely lacking the normal softness he had when speaking to her.

I immediately felt her irritation. I knew it wasn't her irritation this time. I knew it was her demon. As odd as it seemed to say, we were beginning to be able to tell the difference.

"Does he know that Kostya fixed you once already, love?" I asked her.

"No. And I'm not going to tell him," she said, grumpily. I had to cough to keep from laughing out loud at her response.

"I think you should still try. I think Andrei and Stephen's theory of you being here to help us as much as anyone else makes sense. It wouldn't be reasonable for you to be here and not be able to help the three of us," I said. He could tell by my tone that there was going to be no arguing with me.

Viktor simply nodded once, then walked over to Sephie. It was irritating to my demon that Viktor had seemingly rejected it, but it was irritating to me that he seemed like he was still struggling to be around her and that he seemed like he preferred to be disconnected from the rest of us. I wasn't sure how to handle it from him..

We all watched as he placed his hand on her shoulder. In much the same way as it happened when Misha first showed him his gift, we watched a little white light come down from somewhere above us all and land in his hand. He touched Sephie once more, lighting her up. The one hole that we could see when Viktor first touched her filled itself in, making her shine brighter than before.

I could feel her relief as he was helping her. She finally felt calm again. Really, truly calm. Ivan caught my eye while we watched. "Did his reluctance pi*s you off as much as it did me?" he asked.

"Don't ask s*upid questions."

"Thought so. Stephen needs to help him get over his aversion to our demons or it's going to get ugly and I'm not sure it's going to be us that starts it."

"I could not agree more. He's next after he fixes Andrei and Misha. I'll hold him down if I have to."

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Adrik

Once Viktor was done with Sephie, she came back to me while he moved on to help Misha and Andrei. Her heart stopping smile was once again across her face, making the room a little brighter and the rest of us lighter for seeing it.

She looked at me, squinting her eyes as she tucked herself into my side. She glanced over at Ivan as well, analyzing him for a moment.

“Why are you two pi*sed off?” she asked both of us.

“Viktor’s reluctance to help you,” Ivan said.

“We’re going to make sure that he lets Stephen help him before he leaves tonight, He’s going to have to get over his aversion to us sooner or later,” I said.

“Or it’s not going to be pretty, is it?” she asked.

“Not one bit,” Ivan said.

Sephie was quiet for a moment. She caught Stephen’s eye, motioning him over to us while Viktor was working on the Wonder Twins.

“I have on idea,” she said to us, then she said the same thing out loud to Stephen. She let us watch as she put our conversation into pictures, sending it to Stephen as she held his hand. He understood immediately.

“I just need to touch him to do it,” Stephen said quietly: “I do think he’s scared of you three especially, so maybe let me try to talk him into it. We all noticed his reluctance to help you. It wasn’t just you three.”

As Viktor finished with Misha and Andrei, they both looked much lighter, just as Sephie did. Everything was returning to normal after our afternoon with Battista. Everyone was back to calm as well. The only emotion we could feel other than the peaceful calm was from me and Ivan and our irritation with Viktor.

Stephen looked at Viktor, asking, “are you ready for your turn now, Viktor?” Viktor hesitated, which made both Ivan and I struggle to restrain ourselves.

“You two either look at the floor or keep your eyes closed. That’s not going to help him,” Sephie told us, very firmly. “I can feel your frustration. I understand it, but it’s not helping right now.”

We both exhaled, trying to keep ourselves calm. Andrei and Misha picked up on something going on, feeling our frustration through Sephie. They both joined in with Stephen, trying to help convince Viktor.

“Viktor, you know you’ve been uncomfortable around Sephie since her eyes started going dark. Don’t think we all haven’t noticed you avoiding her,” Andrei said.

“We also know it’s not her that makes you uncomfortable. Why wouldn’t you want help to feel comfortable around her again?” Misha asked.

“You let Kostya help you with your overwhelming sadness, but this fear that you have because of your time in Syria is going to become just as overwhelming to you if you don’t address it. Trust me, man. I know what it’s like to live with more trauma than you can carry. The slightest thing becomes completely overwhelming. Let me help you feel better,” Stephen said. As he was talking, he was slowly taking steps toward Viktor. As he said the last sentence, he casually reached out and touched Viktor’s arm.

It was all he needed to start the process.

“That little s*it,” Sephie said to me and Ivan. She was clearly impressed that he’d managed to sneak it in.

Ivan was laughing in his head. “I should’ve known he’d do this. Stephen’s stealth is unparalleled. Can’t believe I doubted him.”

Andrei caught Sephie’s eye from across the room. He was clearly enjoying the fact that Stephen had managed to sneak it in as well. The two of them

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had a silent conversation. Afterward, she shared it with us.

“Bubba says he’s glad Stephen did this. He didn’t think Viktor was going to let him. He might’ve snooped while Viktor was helping Misha earlier. He said the aversion to us was even bigger than any of us knew. I’m wondering if this is going to p*ss him off now,” Sephie said. She glanced up at me, revealing her swirling eyes. The white was clearly mixed in with the other colors. She was starting to worry.

When Stephen was done, Viktor looked better for a moment. Before the anger came out. “WHAT THE F*CK, MAN! You don’t do that to someone unless they’re willing,” he all but screamed at Stephen.

It immediately sent me and Ivan inte offense mode. We both took steps toward Viktor, My anger was quickly rising. I’m sure Ivan’s was too. Sephie caught both of us before we could move any closer to Viktor. One hand on my chest, one hand on Ivan’s chest.

“WAIT. Before you two do something that will damage this relationship further than it already is,” she said. We could hear the urgency in her voice. We could also feel her starting to panic, which didn’t help either of us calm down. She looked up at both of us, her eyes were black, but we could see the white swirling behind it.

We could also clearly see the tears threatening to fall.

1 backed off. Ivan did too, once he saw me move back slightly. Sephie turned toward Viktor, but she was looking at the floor for a moment. I knew she was trying to get her eyes to change back. When she looked up at him, we were all hit with a wave of her sadness. This was tearing her up inside.

“Viktor, would you have let Stephen help you if he didn’t sneak up on you?” she asked. He didn’t answer her at first. He looked like he was too angry to answer her. “You don’t have to answer. I know you weren’t going to.” She paused for a moment, trying to keep herself together, but we could all feel the turmoil she was in. She was finally letting herself really feel the pain of him avoiding her, the pain of him rejecting us, his discomfort being around us. “You’re allowed to feel however you want to feel about us now that you know everything, Viktor. I won’t stop you, I won’t even judge you. I understand it’s a lot to deal with. What hurts me, though, is that you would rather hold on to the pain you’ve been carrying around for years than to get help with it so you can feel good again. You’re choosing pain over us. And it’s not even that I’m hurt that you would choose pain over me, because I’ve been in your life for a very short amount of time. But the fact that you would choose pain over these five men who’ve been through so much with you is a little much for me to bear.”

She didn’t wait for him to respond to her. She turned and walked back to the bedroom, closing the door behind her. We could all feel her fall apart as soon as she was alone. I knew Viktor wasn’t as connected to her as the rest of us, but I found myself wishing he was at this moment so he could feel the pain she was in over this.

“Go to her. We’ll sort this out,” Ivan said. “Do whatever you need to do to make her happy again. I don’t know how long I can stand her feeling like this without killing him.”

King of the Underworld

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 454

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Sephie

I left Viktor still seething, along with the rest of them. I just needed a break after everything today. I didn't even do that much today. Stephen did the majority of it. I still found myself feeling exhausted. I'd been fighting coming to terms with Viktor avoiding me for so long and I just didn't have the strength to do so any longer.

Apparently Stephen was more talented than he thought. I wasn't able to hold this back any longer after he helped me get rid of everything from earlier in the day.

Once I closed the bedroom door behind me, I fell apart. I felt guilty for doing so, knowing they were all going to feel it. There wasn't anything I could do about it either. If I tried to keep it from them, it made it worse. They were condemned to feel everything I was feeling from now on and I didn't know how to fix that.

I was sitting on the bed, hugging my knees to my chest, my forehead resting on my arms when I heard Adrik quietly come in the bedroom. He didn't say anything, he just climbed on the bed behind me, wrapping his arms and legs around me. His hands lightly ran over my arms and legs, trying to offer comfort where he could.

Instead of staying curled up in a ball, I turned toward him, climbing into his lap. My arms and legs now wrapped around him; I could feel the pull in my chest from him. His hands ran lightly through my hair and over my back as he held onto me while I worked to get control of myself.

After letting me cry for several minutes, he finally asked, "I know you're upset about Viktor, but there's something else now isn't there?" I nodded my head against his shoulder, without picking my head up. I felt his hand on the back of my neck, pulling me far enough away that he could look at me. He didn't need me to answer. He was good enough now that he could find the answer on his own. He looked pained when he found what he was looking for, but then a small smile appeared on his face. "You seem to have forgotten how upset I was at not being able to feel you this afternoon.*

I did forget. He was angry with me for figuring out a way to shut him out completely. As far as he was concerned, my reason for doing so didn't matter. I couldn't help the small smile that gradually stretched across my face as I remembered his reaction to not being able to feel me.

"I'm not the only one that feels that way, Sephie. Given the chance to be connected to you or not connected to you, they're all going to pick you. Every single time," he said.

"Maybe not all of them," I said, once again thinking about Viktor.

He took a deep breath. I could feel his frustration at the situation as well. "I would've said he would come around, but after what just happened, I'm honestly not sure anymore."

I let my fingers trace the outline of his face, running through his ever-present stubble. He closed his eyes, leaning into my touch.

"Maybe he needs time to realize how much better he feels after Stephen helped him? I don't know either. I never expected this to happen. It's not just you and Ivan, though. It's all of them. They're all irritated with Viktor. I'm not sure if it's making everything worse or not. Maybe he does feel like he's being singled out," I said.

"I don't know either. What I do know, however," he said as he cupped my face with both of his hands, pressing his lips to mine. "Is that I'm starting to tell the difference between you and your demon. It also was very angry with me earlier today when I told you to never shut me out again." He had a boyish grin on his face as he watched the surprise on my face.

"Really?"

"Really. I started noticing it when we were at the hotel. We all did, I think. But then when you got mad at me, it was like you were doubly mad. It was your anger, plus some," he said.

I was quiet for a moment, mulling over what he'd just told me. "What if by acknowledging them we're strengthening the connection even more? It seems like each time we do, something new like that happens. Mine tried to save me, all of ours tried to warn us. Maybe they want to talk to us," I said.

"So now I have to deal with Ivan in my head, as well as my demon?" he said, faking inconvenience.

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I giggled. "You're going to have a fanel of voices in your head."

His handsome smile stretched across his face. "I'm happy to see your smile. You're lighter again. When you're not thinking about Viktor. Stephen really did help you. So did Viktor. The difference was obvious."

"Maybe he just needs Kostya to fix him again and he'll feel better too," I said. "What happened after I left? I haven't heard any commotion. I guess they aren't fighting out there."

"Ivan told me to come back here. He said he wouldn't be able to stand you feeling the way you were when you left for very long," he said. I looked down, trying to keep the guilty feeling from growing too strong. I felt his fingers lift my chin so I would meet his gaze once more. "He just wants you to feel better. He would've said the same thing even if he couldn't feel you. It was very obvious that you were upset." He leaned forward, his lips against mine. He pulled back so he could look me in the eyes again, searching for the thoughts that were running through my head. He pulled me to him, holding me tightly. "We'll figure this out. Promise."

We sat in silence for a while, before his curiosity got the best of him. "You and Andrei can talk to each other almost as easily as you talk to me and Ivan now, can't you?"

I nodded my head against his shoulder again. "It's easier the more we do it. I still don't know how he communicates with Misha. I haven't tried it with him yet. I'm experimenting with Stephen. I think he's the most difficult right now. I need to be touching him to get information to him."

"But he's incredibly observant. I think half the time he already knows whatever it is we need to tell him," Adrik said. "I never knew that guy had this much going on in his head all these years."

1 sighed. "Like I told him, I'm just glad he finally decided to show everyone how incredibly smart he is. I wish Viktor would pay attention and see how much better Stephen has been since he got rid of everything from his past he's been carrying around." I groaned in frustration, falling backward so I laying on the bed, my legs still wrapped around Adrik.

"I like where this is going," he said, his s*xy smirk on his face when I squinted my eyes at him. I covered my eyes with my arm, trying to get my brain to just stop for a minute. He took the opportunity to lift my shirt as high as he could get it without making me move so his hands could roam over my breasts and stomach. I had to admit, it was helping me relax. "Can you ask your dad or Kostya what to do, solnishko?"

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Sephie

“I would, if they came to me. I’ve never been the one that’s in control of when they show up or not. It’s always a surprise to me,” I said. Adrik’s hands were still roaming over my stomach, up to my breasts, then back to my hips. I was beginning to think it was the equivalent of when my hands needed to fidget. I could feel him trying to come up with answers as I laid there. “I’m not sure how much they’ll be able to tell me, either. They’re not supposed to interfere.”

“Maybe Misha can find answers, then,” he said,

“Do you even know the questions? Because I don’t,” I said, my arms still covering my eyes.

“I think the biggest question is what to do about Viktor. I would’ve thought that he would come around by now, but he’s still clearly hesitating. I feel like there’s something we need to be doing to fix this that we’re not doing,” he said. I could hear the frustration in his voice as he tried to come up with answers.

“Maybe this one isn’t on us to fix,” I said, peeking at him from under my arms. It was starting to make more sense in my head. “Maybe this is what he needs to go through to realize his full potential. The rest of us have had to deal with big things to be able to handle our gifts, Viktor sk*pped that part, because Kostya showed him before he was ready. What if this is him completing those levels he s**ipped?”

His hands had stopped, one on either side of my rib cage as he thought about what I’d just said. I still had my arms over my eyes, but I could somewhat see him from underneath my arms. He leaned forward, pulling my arms away from my face. He pulled me back to a sitting position, his handsome smile on his face. I could feel the pull in my chest that was from him as he looked at me for a few moments. He placed one hand on my cheek, kissing me softly while his thumb rubbed gently on my cheek. “The way your mind works sometimes makes me think that nothing is impossible with you,” he said.

“This one wasn’t just me. I would’ve never thought that if you hadn’t said what you said first.”

His smile got bigger. “Teamwork makes the m*therf*ckin’ dream work.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. I wrapped my arms around his neck, pressing my body against his. This man. I loved him so completely.

“We should tell Ivan before someone gets hurt, though,” he said, his arms holding me just as tightly.

“Fair point,” I said.

“Has anyone died yet?” I asked Ivan.

“Negative, princess. We sent him to his apartment. And by we, I mean Andrei. That kid is really becoming the voice of reason lately.”

“He has a bit of an unfair advantage that he readily exploits and I’m here for it. He likely knew it wouldn’t have been productive to try and talk to Viktor anymore tonight. Are you guys still in the penthouse?”

“Yeah, we could all feel your mood get lighter. We were hoping you’d come back out at some point.”

Adrik had heard our exchange. He smirked at me, saying, “see, told you. They prefer to be connected to you, solnishko. You’re not holding them back from anything.”

I sighed as I stood up to leave the bedroom, still thinking about everything that was happening. Adrik surprised me by picking me up, causing me to squeal. I laughed, holding onto his shoulders as he carried me back out to the kitchen, where the guys were waiting.

When we walked into the kitchen, Adrik announced, “Sephie figured it out.”

I could hear each of them exhale loudly. “Oh thank G*d,” they all said.

“Is it something that’s going to be resolved quickly? Because I’m willing to ask Vitaliy if we can trade Viktor for Ilya at this point,” Misha said.

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“That I do not know, my adorable Russian guardian,” I said as Adrik deposited me on the counter, across from everyone. He stood in front of me, in between my legs. He was facing away from me, so he could look at the guys while we talked. I wrapped my arms around his waist, resting my head on his shoulder, much like he enjoyed doing with me. “But I do think it’s going to be resolved at some point now, which is more than I could say an hour ago.”

“What do you think it is?” Andrei asked.

“You ask like you haven’t already snooped through her head to find the answer,” Misha said laughing.

Andrei laughed too, but disagreed. “No, she can feel me when I do. I’d get caught with her. You? Not so much.”

“That hurts me, Andrei. I’m very sensitive,” Misha said, his hand over his heart.

“Are you two nerds done?” I asked, smiling at both of them. It made me happy to see them trying to lighten the mood, picking at each other like two brothers.

Misha cleared his throat. “Yes, teacher. Done. Continue, please.”

“We all had to go through something big to realize the full potential of our gifts. It was different for each of us, but it was always something very difficult to deal with. Once we dealt with whatever it was, we starting unlocking levels,” Adrik said, his hand running lightly back and forth across my arms that were wrapped around him as he talked.

“Viktor kind of sk*pped that because Kostya revealed his gift early. I think it needed to happen when it did, especially for Ilya’s sake, so I’m not blaming Kostya for anything here. But Viktor sk*pped a very important part. I think he’s having to go through it now. It’s just harder for all of us to take because to us, having his gift means everything should be grand already. He essentially did it backward from the rest of us,” I said.

“So once he deals with what happened tonight, he should be good?” Misha asked.

“I can’t say for sure, but that’s what I’m thinking,” I said.

“I still don’t quite understand why he had such issue with Stephen helping him,” Misha said, his normal happy personality suddenly turning darker.

“When you’ve been carrying around that much trauma and keeping it locked away, you almost start to identify with it. You become the trauma. You identify as the trauma. I think if Viktor could’ve realized that he isn’t his past when Kostya first got rid of all the grief he was carrying around, he wouldn’t have had to go through this. Instead, he’s having to peel back the layers of his trauma and go through them one by one,” Stephen said.

“Let’s hope that Kostya helps him again, then. He was better for a few days, but anything to do with your demons makes hima pi*sy, which makes me pi*sy and I don’t even know why. I hate being p*ssy,” Misha said. It was obvious that he was completely frustrated.

Adrik laughed. “It’s not you that’s pi*sy, Misha. The same thing happens with us.” I watched as Misha tried to understand what Adrik had just said. Instead of saying anything more, he switched his eyes to black, which switched mine and Ivan’s as well.

“Shut up,” Misha said, completely surprised.

“Your demons are the ones that are pis*y?” Andrei asked.

“They’re pi*sy, they’re hurt because they feel like Viktor rejected them, and they’re also trying to help more. And Sephie’s was just as mad at me today as she was when I told her to never shut me out again. Yours are likely picking up on everything from ours, which is why you’re p*ssy but don’t know why,” Adrik said.

Misha thought for a moment, then looked up at us. “I just have one question, Does my demon also like pancakes?”

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Sephle

Adrik decided to go to Viktor's apartment and talk to him while we all waited upstairs. Next to Ivan, Viktor was the closest to Adrik. We all knew Viktor did better with difficult situations away from everyone, so Adrik thought it might go better if it was just him. None of us could argue with that line of thinking, so we waited.

"If nothing else, maybe he'll give him a few more days off. I think forcing him to slow down will help him deal. Apparently, I'm not the only thing he's been avoiding." I said as Adrik left the apartment.

"None of us understand why he's been avoiding you, spider monkey," Andrei said. "We've all noticed it for months now, but none of us understand it. Even knowing that you're the one that's helped us all figure everything out. It still doesn't make sense."

1 caught myself thinking back to my earlier worry about keeping them from living their own lives. "You're worried about something else beside Viktor, aren't you, princess?" Ivan asked me. He could tell by my expression that the answer was yes. "Wanna talk about it now or later?"

"Later."

He simply nodded his head and let the subject drop, helping to steer the conversation to other subjects. He looked at Andrei, asking, "have you tried communicating with Boss the same way you do Sephie?"

Andrei looked shocked at the implication, which made everyone laugh. "I think Ivan means that since he and I can communicate so easily, it should also be fairly easy for you to do so as well," I said.

"Oh. No, I haven't tried. I haven't even thought about it, if I'm being honest. But now that you say that out loud, I would think there should be a way. right? I'm still trying to figure out how to make it work with Stephen. It seems like there still has to be contact with him to get anything through," Andrei said.

"How do you make it work with Misha?" I asked him.

"It's kind of changed now. When we first started doing it, I could like project images into his head. He can ask me whatever or tell me whatever and I'll get it easily, but I had to respond to him in images at first. Now it's getting easier the more we do it. I can respond to him with words now and he gets it," Andrei said.

As Andrei was explaining how he communicated with Misha, I tried to push a memory of us running at the house, just to see if he could see it. Misha's grin stretched across his face as he'd seen it. Once I knew he'd seen it, I could hear him tell me "I miss it too" as a response. He quickly followed it with, "try words, too. I think Andrei unlocked it for me, so you should have an easier time."

"I've been thinking that you should order Adrik to the house again. I think we all need it again already," I said to Misha.

"I fully support this plan," he said, grinning at me. The other three had figured out that he and I just discovered we could communicate.

I looked at Andrei, then to Ivan. "It should work on you two, too. I mean, I would think so, since Ivan can talk to both me and Adrik. If Andrei's like me, then it should work, right?" I asked.

I could see Andrei trying to push his thoughts to Ivan. Ivan's sly grin spread slowly across his face as he heard Andrei in his head. Once they had a conversation, we all looked at Stephen. "Now we just have to figure out how to start with you and then you'll be able to do it too."

We were still experimenting with Stephen when Adrik came back to the penthouse. So far, we still needed to be able to touch Stephen for him to get the message, but he was able to do it with everyone and do so quickly. One touch and whatever information he needed was downloaded to him instantly. We were laughing because I'd come up with a really long explanation for some incredibly ridiculous thing, just to have as much material as possible. He touched my hand and got it all instantly like I'd said it to him out loud.

"Do I even want to know what you guys are doing?" Adrik asked as he walked back into the kitchen. He looked highly amused to see us all laughing.

"We're trying to figure out how to communicate with Stephen. So far, we have to be touching him to get the information to him, but I just went on this really long rant over nothing and he got it instantly when he touched my hand," I said, still laughing. "And we also figured out how to talk to

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Misha and Andrei. Ivan can do it now too, which means so can you."

Adrik looked surprised, but impressed. We quickly explained how to do it with both Andrei and then Misha. It worked right away for both of them. Even they were surprised it worked so quickly with Adrik. He tried our system with Stephen as well, getting immediate results.

"I think the more we practice at this, the easier it will become all around," Ivan said. His mood turned somewhat serious as he asked what the rest of us didn't want to ask, "How did it go?"

Adrik sighed. "I think Sephie is right. I think he's done everything backward from us, which is why we're having a harder time with it. He knows he's been an a*shole. He just doesn't know how to stop it yet. The time in Syria did a number on him. We all know that, but we all thought he was handling it. In reality, he just shoved it to the back of his mind and never thought about it again. When we first met Sephie, she was a welcome distraction from it. But then she started helping everyone else deal with their own trauma, plus revealing everything she's been through. It was so fresh for him that he didn't want to go through it all again. So he started avoiding. Everything."

"What about Stephen helping him tonight, though? Did that do anything for him?" I asked.

"I think so. He's finally feeling everything that's he's been locking away. I suspect he's feeling like you did when Stephen helped you. It was like wa crashing into all of us as everything opened back up for you. But once we felt the emotion, it was gone right away. I don't think it's leaving as quickly with Viktor as it did with you, but at least it's moving now," he said.

"Does that mean Stephen needs to do it again?" Misha asked.

We all turned to Stephen, not sure of the answer. He looked somewhat surprised. "Bold of you all to assume I'd have that answer," he said. "But I can give my best guess. It was much easier with Seph, Andrei, and Misha today because the blocks were fresh. Meaning they were weak. The longer you try and bottle up something, the stronger the block gets. Viktor's been holding all of that in for quite a while, so the block is strong. I might've only cracked it, so to speak. Things are moving, but he might also be able to repair the dam, if you will. We should be able to tell in the next few days if it stuck or not. I'm not above sneaking it in on him again if that's what it takes."

"You don't need him mad at you like that again, though. That's not fair to you," I said.

"Eh, he never stays mad for very long. I don't think he was even mad at me. He was just mad at knowing now he's gotta feel it," Stephen said.

"That's exactly why he's mad. He told me so," Adrik said.

"So what did you tell him?" Ivan asked.

"I gave him a couple more days to get a handle on everything. I don't like being without him, but we can manage. He wants to deal with everything on his own, so he's got the chance to do so. I told him not to waste the opportunity," Adrik said.

I found myself feeling slightly relieved that I'd get another break from him, but I was also upset that I would feel that way about Viktor.

"Don't worry, spider monkey. We'll get this figured out and things will go back to normal," Andrei said, in an effort to comfort me. I looked at him, loving him for being so thoughtful. "Normal is relative anyway, Bubba."

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Sephie

Since we'd decided to attend the fundraiser for the hospital so Adrik could have a chance to see the mayor, as well as the DA, as well as the police commissioner in one place, in one evening, that meant I had to buy yet another dress. Which meant I was forced to go shopping.

My only consolation was that I had to take at least three guys with me. Shopping for a formal dress with three giant men in tow was enough comic relief that I found myself enjoying the process. Ivan looked angry at all the dresses, Andrei looked slightly uncomfortable like he was going to get yelled at for accidentally touching one of them, and Misha was busy picking out the ugliest dresses he could find to see if he could talk me into trying them on. He would hold up the most hideous dress he laid his eyes on and would say loudly, "I really feel like this is the one. We can stop looking." He was my f*ckery twin and I loved him for it.

The poor girl working in the dress shop was completely overwhelmed with those three. She didn't know whether to be terrified or amused. Finally, she mustered the courage to approach me and ask me what I was looking for.

"You see, that's the problem. I don't even know," I said to her. I noticed her nervously watching the three guys. I tried not to laugh at her. "Don't mind them. They look scary, but they're quite nice."

She tried to believe me, but it was definitely a struggle. We discussed what event I needed the dress for, what I liked, and what colors I preferred. I explained what it was for and that I needed to have my back covered. I left the rest up to her. She set off among the racks of dresses, picking several for me to try.

She might've been trying to get us out of the store faster because she was terrified, but she managed to help me find the perfect dress in under ten minutes. Because it was still cold outside, she pulled a dress with long sleeves. My back was completely covered, but it had a plunging neckline that I was sure Adrik would both love and hate. I had to admit, my boobs looked amazing in the dress, so I decided the gamble on his level of hatred for the showing this much skin was one I should take. Between my cleavage and the slit in the skirt, it had plenty of sex appeal while not showing off everything. Instead of black this time, I went with a deep blue. Might as well make as many details as possible different from the last time I had to wear a formal dress.

I was busy looking at myself in the changing room, when I heard all three guys basically demanding that I show them. "We know you like this one, so you have to show us," Misha said, in Russian.

"I had no idea you three would be so interested in such girly things," I said, walking out to show them.

"Princess, this one might be better than the last one and the last one was pretty perfect," Ivan said.

I pointed to my cleavage. "Too much? Think it'll pi*s him off?"

Andrei chuckled. "You would only p*ss him off by showing your whole boob. Which you're not. You'll be fine."

"You saw Vanessa. You're still leaps and bounds more tastefully dressed, even with that amount of cleavage," Ivan said.

Misha walked closer. He had a curious look on his face. "I know you're going to wear your contacts that night, but make your eyes turn blue right now. I want to see something," he said quietly.

I thought about how much I loved Adrik and saw Misha's grin. He turned to Ivan and Andrei and motioned them over. "It's virtually the same color," he said, pointing to my eyes and the dress. Andrei and Ivan walked over to see for themselves, both agreeing with Misha.

"Sold!" I said, knowing that Adrik would love it just for that reason alone. "Also, it doesn't hurt that this one fits me perfectly already and needs no alterations. This was meant to be. Wrap it up. Let's get the hell out of here," I said, walking back to the changing room. I could hear them all laughing at me as I changed back into my clothes.

A quick trip to get shoes, which was admittedly less painful, and we were on our way back to the penthouse. On the elevator up, they were giving me a hard time about hating shopping. I knew they just enjoyed teasing me about it. I knew they loved the fact that I hated shopping because it meant they didn't have to go with me. "Guys have it much easier, especially when it comes to formal events. Your biggest dilemma is whether to wear a vest or a cu*merbund, tie or bow tie. You saw what women put themselves through. For no apparent reason other than they hate being comfortable," I said.

"Don't be grumpy, gazelle," Misha'said, trying not to laugh. "We secretly love your hatred for shopping"

As the elevator doors dinged to announce our arrival, Ivan quickly asked, "are we sworn to secrecy again this time about your dress?"

"Nope. You can even show him what it looks like. Pretty much everything that happened last time should not happen this time. Just to be safe," I said.

Ivan smiled at me, but I could feel them all flinch as they thought about the last time I had to wear a formal dress. "Don't worry, princess. It will be much different this time. I doubt Boss will let go of you the entire night. If he has to, then one of us will be there with you the whole time. He didn't say anything else when I looked at him skeptically. He just held his pinky up in front of him. I grinned at him as I grabbed his pinky with mine. Andres and Misha waited in the elevator with us, each of them making a promise, solidified by their own pinky swear, that they wouldn't leave me alone the entire night.

"I love you guys," I said, completing the pinky swears with all of them. Andrei stepped in front of me and Misha was there to pick me up so I could wrap my arms and legs around Andrei. He happily carried me to Adrik's office so I could ignore everyone looking at me.

"You do know that everyone will be looking at you at that fundraiser, right?" Andrei asked quietly as we walked from the elevator to the office.

"Don't remind me. I haven't figured out how I'm going to handle that yet," I said.

"We'll protect you," Andrei said, squeezing my legs as we walked into Adrik's office.

He looked up as we walked in, his handsome smile stretching across his face as he saw Andrei carrying me. Andrei stopped and set me down so I could go to Adrik, who stood up to come to me. "You're not cursing, so I take that as a good sign that you found something quickly," he said, his lips finding mine.

"I did find something and it was relatively painless, so no cursing. Yet," I said, grinning at him.

"Am I to be kept in the dark this time as well?" he asked. He was clearly curious as to what I found.

"Nope. Ivan can show you, even. They all saw it. I'm actually kind of nervous that you'll be mad so maybe you should see it because I might have to get a different one if you veto this one," I said.

He looked at Ivan, raising his eyebrow. I could tell those two were having a silent conversation, as I could feel Adrik bristle at the thought of being mad over the dress I chose. Adrik looked at what Ivan showed him, turning back to me. I could feel his desire for me come on very strongly. He did laugh softly at me. "I do love that you're worried about my opinion, but you're so incredibly tasteful and classy that I don't think it's possible for you! to make me angry with your wardrobe choices. It's perfect, solnishko."

"Don't say that. I'm going to take it as a challenge and try to prove you wrong." I said, grinning at him. He pressed his lips to mine.

"Somehow, I think I will win that bet," he said, smiling against my lips.

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Chapter 458

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Sephie

The fundraiser was at Battista's hotel. He was once again back in the city, so he was also going to be in attendance. Vitaliy had somehow managed to allow himself to be talked into coming as well. It made me feel slightly more comfortable knowing his guys would be there as well. I was trying to stay calm, but it was proving difficult.

I once again enlisted the help of Ms. Jackson for my hair and makeup. She enjoyed it so much that she asked me to please go to more formal functions so she could do it more often.

"I didn't realize how much I missed this part of being a spy, child," she said as she was working on my hair.

"You enjoy all this work?" I asked.

"It's not work if you enjoy it, now is it?" she said, smiling at me. "Part of being a spy is pretending you're someone else. Looking the part is most of that. It became a bit of a game, I guess. A dangerous game, but a game nonetheless."

She told more stories about her time as a spy as she put the finishing touches on me. Just as she had helped me get into the dress and put my shoes on, there was a knock on her door. "That'll be the guys. Probably all of them again because they couldn't decide who should come get me," I said to her. I knew it was all of them, but I needed it to sound like I guessed.

"Oh my. It's been too long since I've laid my eyes on this many handsome men in tuxedos," she said as she opened her door.

1 laughed. "This is really why you want me to go to more formal functions. So you can see them all dressed up."

She turned to look at me. "Do not ruin my dreams," she said very seriously.

"We're still waiting on an invite to Bingo, Ms. Jackson," Ivan said, winking at her.

Ms. Jackson blushed as I walked toward the door. "Thank you, Ms. Jackson, for once again making me look marvelous," I said, leaning down to give her a hug.

"Child, if you haven't figured out by now that I'm just highlighting your best traits, then I don't know how to help you understand," she said, smiling at me. "Now, get out of here so I can watch these fine gentlemen walk down the hallway."

We all laughed as I slid my arm through Ivan's as we walked to the elevator. Once the doors closed behind us, Misha said, "I'm beginning to think she only thinks of me as a piece of meat." He paused, then added, "I'm strangely fine with that."

Vitaliy had come to the penthouse and was waiting with Adrik for us to come upstairs. They were all standing near the door when we walked in. They all stopped and turned to us as we walked in. My eyes landed on Adrik immediately and I tried to focus on him, leaving everyone else out of the picture.

He'd already seen the dress, but seeing it in person made it better for him. I'd left my contacts out specifically so I could show him that the dress matched my eyes when they turned blue for him. As I got closer and he could see my eyes were blue, it was obvious that he'd made the connection.

He wrapped his arms around my waist, his desire very evident. "I thought the last dress was perfect, but this one might be even better. I loved the black, but this one might be my favorite. It's a perfect match," he said quietly, his lips next to my ear.

"That might've been the selling point," I said. He brushed his facial hair lightly against my cheek, sending goosebumps over my body. "I need to put my contacts in and then we can leave," I said as I kissed his cheek. I had already forgotten that I had lipstick on so I had to wipe the smudge off his cheek before going to put my contacts in.

When I came back, Vitally caught me before I made it back to Adrik. "Sladkaya, I've been telling my son that you're absolutely perfect for him for a while now, but you keep finding new ways to confirm that. You're absolutely stunning, Sephie." He surprised me by pulling out a silver necklace from his pocket. "This was Lena's. It was her favorite. She asked me to give it to you," he said quietly. He didn't give me time to object, he simply moved behind me so that he could put it on. It was a simple diamond pendant that rested perfectly in that spot where my collarbones met. "She had a timeless classic style, much like you, sladkaya. She was not one for ostentatious jewelry, but she loved this necklace. She wants you to have it now."

"You did not get the memo that you're not supposed to make me cry when I'm wearing makeup, Vitaliy," I said as I hugged him. "But thank you. I love it. I love you. And I love her. Not in any specific order." He laughed, hugging me tightly.

Adrik walked over to see. When I showed him what Vitaliy had given me, he looked surprised. "I remember that necklace," he said. "I used to stare at it. The way the light caught the diamond used to fascinate me when I was little."

"Your mother rarely took it off. She told me that she wanted Sephie to have it now," Vitaliy said quietly.

Adrik smiled. "It's perfect."

The guys kept themselves tightly packed around me and Adrik as we walked to the front door of the hotel. They could all feel my nervousness at having people looking at me. As long as Adrik's arm was around me, I managed to stay calm. He had promised several times on the way there that he would not leave my side the entire evening.

"We don't have to stay long. Once I have a chance to talk to the mayor and everyone can see him and the DA, we can leave. I would much rather spend the evening getting you out of that dress anyway," he told me on the way to the hotel.

"I fully support this, "I said, pushing my warmth to him before we got out of the vehicles.

Once we walked inside, I tried to keep my nervousness to a minimum. I failed miserably. But luckily, the guys were all there to offer support, as well as hide me as much as possible.

"People always stare at beautiful women, gazelle," Misha reminded me as we walked into the ballroom. Thankfully, it was a different ballroom from last time so it didn't immediately bring back horrible memories of that night.

"Misha's right. You're also probably the youngest woman here. All the other women are going to look at you because they're old. And jealous," Andrei said.

I laughed at that. "Bubba, you're not allowed to hang around Misha as much. He's a bad influence on you."

"Am I a bad influence or has he finally learned to speak the truth?" Misha asked, cutting his eyes over at me.

Adrik laughed quietly. "I think you're both right. Sephie is gorgeous. Other women are not."

"The mayor is here," Ivan said, pointing to the side of the ballroom where a small group of people were standing and talking. "I haven't seen the DA yet. Or Henry."

As the guys were searching the ballroom to try and find the DA and Henry, Dr. Williams caught sight of us. He smiled as he walked over to us, focusing on me. "Sephie, it's good to see you again. You look much better than the last time I saw you," he said, quickly letting his eyes scan up and down my body.

"I mean, less colorful. That's for sure. But it's undecided as to whether that's better or not. It's so…boring," I said, retuning his smile.

He laughed. "I take it you've healed well? Everything is still good?" he asked.

"It is, Doc. You do good work," I said.

He looked at Adrik. "It's good to see you here as well. You're almost singlehandedly responsible for most of the hospital's budget. We should be giving you an award or something," he said to Adrik. I felt him squeeze me just a little tighter.

"Not necessary. I prefer to remain as anonymous as possible anyway," Adrik said. "It's plenty worth it after you saved Ivan and then Sephie."

"Well, just know it's much appreciated," Dr. Williams said. He excused himself to go talk to someone else, leaving us alone once more.

I looked at Adrik, smiling. "You're so popular," I said, placing my hand against his cheek.

"You're so beautiful," he said, pressing his lips to mine. He pressed his forehead to mine for a moment, his arm still securely around my waist. I knew

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Adrik

Before we could make it across the ballroom to talk to the mayor, I was stopped at least twenty limes by different people wanting to speak to me. I could feel Sephie's delight at me having to be polite and courteous to that marry people. They were all people I'd either helped out or done some kind of business with. Most of the time, when anyone would approach me in public, it was to thank me for something I'd done for them. Tonight was no different.

Surprisingly, Vinny and Anna were among those who stopped us on our way to the mayor.

"Vinny!" Sephie said when she saw him. She couldn't hide her excitement to see him. Or his wife. She loved both of them. "I was not expecting you two to be here, but I'm so glad you are."

"Since the hospital has taken such good care of my father, we try to give back whenever possible," Vinny said. "Now that I'm opening a second restaurant, thanks to you sir, we can increase that."

I smiled at Vinny. He really was a very good man. "That's what it's all about, Vinny. When business owners thrive, the community thrives."

"We can't thank you enough for the second location, sir," Anna said. "It really has been a dream of ours for several years now. You've brought that to life."

"Just be glad that we're not living in that building. Your profits would be cut considerably by me having a sandwich for breakfast, lunch, and dinner," Sephie said, patting her partially exposed stomach.

Vinny raised his eyebrow looking at her skeptically, "you could use more sandwiches if you ask me, bella." Just to be a brat, she pushed her stomach out like she had a belly, telling Vinny that's what she looked like after eating one of his sandwiches. It made me happy to see her finally relaxing while we were here. It helped the rest of us relax as well. The guys stayed close, giving us enough room to talk to people, but not enough that Sephie couldn't easily see every single one of them.

Before we could even finish our conversation with Vinny and Anna, someone else had approached me wanting a moment to talk. I was beginning to feel like Vitaliy when he first came back to the city. Everyone wanted to talk to me. This is why I don't come to these functions.

We'd made it halfway to the mayor, but no further as it seemed like every single person at the function wanted to speak to me.

"Boss, it appears that the mayor is also trying to make it to you, but he's having the same issue. People are stopping him to talk to him before he can make it over," Ivan said quietly.

"Let him come to you. I don't know why, but that needs to happen." Sephie told both me and Ivan.

"That should be easy. I can't even finish one conversation before the next person is already waiting. I'm going to be here all night," I said, somewhat frustrated.

I felt Sephie push her warmth to me; she cut Ivan off from the conversation before saying, "but you look so smashingly handsome doing it. I wouldn't mind watching that for a little longer."

I was in the middle of a conversation with someone who was thanking me for helping their family in their time of need. I glanced over at Sephie, who was standing a step away from me. Her eyes were normal, because of her contacts, but her dress matched her eyes when they changed to blue almost perfectly, giving her the appearance of radiating love for me.

"You're not allowed to wear a dress in any color other than that one ever again,"I told her as I continued with my conversation. I could hear her laughing in my head as she smiled and pretended to be interested in the conversation along with me. She took the step closer to me that meant I could slide my arm around her waist, holding her close to my side while we talked to a seemingly endless stream of people.

I caught sight of Battista during one of my many conversations. He approached Ivan, saying something quietly to him. Ivan responded, then Battista walked toward Vitaliy. My father's men were spread out more throughout the ballroom than my guys. I'd explained the situation to Vitaliy while we were waiting for Sephie to come upstairs from getting help getting ready. He knew how nervous we all were to be here tonight, so his guys were basically running backup for us so my guys could concentrate on Sephie and only Sephie.

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"Your mother warned me that this was going to be difficult for all of you, but she didn't go into details," he'd told me as we discussed it. "Whatever you need from us to make sure sladkaya is comfortable this time will happen That was the end of the discussion as far as Vitaly was concerned. It made me happy that he was so willing to protect her, just like the rest of us.

"Boss, Battista figured out what's happening with you trying to get to the mayor. He's going to bring him over shortly, but he did say he and Vitally were betting on who was going to make the most progress between now and then. Apparently it's somewhat of a race that they're watching from the sidelines," Ivan told me.

"Slowest race ever," Sephie responded. She was still tucked into my side, happy to stay close to me. She would catch one of the guy's eyes and make funny face now and then. She had conversations with all of them, probably trying to make them laugh as they remained close by. I felt her getting antsy next to me at one point and turned to look at her. "I have to pee. I drink water when I'm nervous and I was nervous all afternoon," she told me. She had a guilty look on her face like she'd definitely done something wrong that I couldn't resist. I laughed, leaning down to kiss her quickly.

"Ivan, she needs an escort to the bathroom. Take Andrel too," I told him. I looked at her, smiling up at me, "try to behave yourself this time."

She slid her arm through Ivan's, glancing back at me as they walked away. "Never!" she said as she turned away from me.

She stopped to briefly talk to Battista and Vitaliy before they continued on to the restroom. I counted down the seconds in my head before she returned, I tried to appear like I was listening to the person standing in front of me, but I kept glancing in the direction they'd just walked, waiting for them to return.

When I saw her again, my breath caught. She had no idea how beautiful she was. Every head turned to watch her as she walked past, Ivan and Andrei were trying to keep her distracted as they walked back to me, to help keep her from worrying over everyone watching her. She was laughing with them as they walked, her arm through Ivan's again. She looked absolutely gorgeous as she walked across the ballroom and every single person there noticed, except one. Sephie still had no clue how mesmerizing she was. I loved that about her.

Her smile widened as she made it back to me. She reached up and kissed Ivan's cheek, thanking him and Andrei for the escort, then stepped back to me. I couldn't help myself, I put my hand on her cheek, gently pulling her to me and kissed her. Passionately. In front of everyone. I didn't care. In fact, I might've liked it. I'd just seen the looks on every single man's face in this place, as well as the women. I'd never been more proud that she was mine.

"I wasn't even gone that long. I beat my previous record, evert. But you clearly missed me," she said as I finally got myself under control. She was smiling at me, though. I could feel her warmth, as well. I knew her eyes were matching her dress.

"I clearly love you," I told her as I greeted the next person who wanted to speak to me.

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Sephie

I really had to hand it to the guys. They were so attentive to my needs this time. They were struggling just as much as I was about being here. They were all trying to hide it, but I could tell every single one of them was just at nervous as I was. It seemed to help them deal with that when they could be closer to me, just as it helped me. I wasn't going to complain.

Adrik kept me close. He did have to let go of me a few times when greeting people, but for the most part, he kept one arm around me while he shook hands with literally every person in attendance. It meant I could feel what he felt when he touched people. It was fascinating.

Most people here were overwhelmingly good. When Adrik would shake their hand, it was a momentary feeling of joy. There were a few, however, that had some darkness behind them, but nothing that made any of us worry. Only once did I feel Ivan's bubble go up. Strangely, it was for one of the hospital administrators who had stopped to speak to Adrik. He had very soft hands and an even softer handshake. The kind of handshake that gave you the creeps right away.

I happily stayed blissfully cut off from that conversation while it happened. I took the opportunity to ask Ivan if he could see anything. He showed me what he saw when he looked at the administrator. He wasn't completely consumed by his demon, but it had a very tight hold of the man. The demon itself was clearly defined. The man was older, with a slightly bent over posture, like he'd spent hours pouring over balance sheets. Once I saw what Ivan saw, I wondered if it wasn't the weight of the demon on his back that was causing his poor posture.

I turned my head away from Adrik and the administrator, making eye contact with Stephen as I pretended to cough. I cut my eyes toward the administrator, which meant Stephen was to find the opportunity to speak in front of him to see if we could scare the demon away. He stepped closer to us, to get a sense of the conversation that Adrik was having and interjected a question at the perfect moment.

We all watched as the man suddenly had a coughing attack, almost like he was choking. Ivan still had his bubble up around me, but he was still showing me what he could see. The demon was making a last-ditch effort to get inside, trying to get away from Stephen, which is what was causing the man to cough. His body was trying to reject it.

Stephen was standing just on the other side of Adrik, slightly behind him. I held my hand out to Stephen, who readily took it. He could then see what Ivan was seeing. He spoke a second time and even went to help the man. As soon as Stephen touched the man, Ivan could see the demon just vanish. Stephen's eyes went a little wide, but he kept himself under control. Once the man stopped coughing, Stephen returned to stand just behind Adrik once more.

This time, he grabbed my hand, showing me what had just happened. When he touched the man, he could feel the rage from the demon, who actually spoke to him. I could clearly hear it say, "you'll never get all of us." Then, it laughed as it was vanishing.

I got chills as I watched what Stephen had seen. Adrik and Ivan both felt it immediately and I was hit with a wave of fiery anger from both of them. I didn't mean to laugh, but I did. It caused everyone to look at me. It appeared that I was laughing at this man having a coughing attack in front of me.

I cleared my throat, looking at the man. "Sorry. I laugh when I'm nervous," I told him, hoping that was enough of an explanation to grant me some grace and make me not look like a giant a*shole.

The administrator surprised me by laughing with me. "It's okay. That came out of nowhere, but I actually feel much better now," he said, excusing himself as he grabbed someone who was walking by.

The guys took the opportunity to close in on me and Adrik, cutting anyone else off for just a moment. I quickly shared what we'd just witnessed with both Andrei and Misha as Ivan shared it with Adrik.

"That was different," Adrik said. "He's the only one so far tonight. Honestly, I was expecting more."

Battista took the opportunity of us being mostly alone to walk to the mayor. He interrupted the conversation the mayor was having and pulled him toward us. It was good to be ridiculously wealthy, apparently.

Before they could make it all the way to us, Adrik made sure I was okay. "You're okay now? I felt you get cold."

"I'm okay. You and Ivan are really quick now. It wasn't like it was with Ilya this time. I just got the chills when I heard it speak to Stephen, but I appreciate the heat boost. I'll never turn that down," I said, smiling up at him.

He smiled softly at me, pressing his lips to mine once again just before the mayor walked up. The guys stepped back enough that Battista and the mayor could talk to Adrik, but made it so no one else could approach them and interrupt the conversation we'd been trying to make happen for hours now.

Adrik's hand was around my waist as he shook hands with the mayor. I felt a moment of joy when Adrik touched him and nothing else. Ivan shared what he saw. The mayor still had a dark form over him, but it couldn't gain a hold of him. It was still trying. It would move when the mayor moved, but it wasn't completely attached yet. I discreetly offered Stephen my hand so he could see what Ivan was seeing and so he'd know what to do. He once again stepped closer, paying attention to the conversation, waiting for the perfect time to interject.

Adrik and the mayor had spoken before, but they tried to keep their interactions limited. It was obvious that Battista had also spoken to the mayor before, as those two were familiar with each other. There was a level of comfort between them that only happened when you'd had several conversations with a person.

Doug, the mayor, told Adrik quietly, "I've been speaking with my district attorney. We're really working hard to find something definitive on the doctor so we can charge him. Honestly, I don't want you to turn him over to us until I know we have something that will stick. He's wreaked havoc on this city for a very long time. If we can't get the justice system to take care of him, then you need to."

"I might have what you're looking for," Adrik told him. "We've come across some records from the boss that paid him to create brawn in the first * place. They're quite detailed. Before I turn them over to your DA, I'd like to meet him, however."

Doug looked momentarily surprised, which made me tense, but he followed it with, "I just assumed you'd met him before." He looked around the room, adding, "he's here somewhere, but if you don't get a chance to meet him tonight, I'll arrange a meeting. Somehow. I'm fairly certain that Henry is having me followed," he said so quietly that we almost missed it.

"What does your DA think about Henry?" Stephen asked. Doug looked surprised that Stephen spoke, but when he saw that Adrik was waiting for an answer, he continued with the conversation. As he did, Ivan shared what he was seeing once again. Just like with the hospital administrator, the demon that looked like a dark cloud just behind the mayor was frantic to get in.

Doug answered, "he's ready to charge him. If you have more information on him, I would love it." He barely got his sentence out and he, too, started coughing uncontrollably. Almost violently. Once again, Stephen reached out and touched the mayor's arm, asking if he was okay or if he needed help. When he did, Ivan could see the dark cloud behind the mayor disappear.

"That's twice now that someone has coughed uncontrollably in front of us. People are going to start wondering what the hell we're doing, "I told Ivan.

"Saving lives is sometimes messy business, princess," Ivan said. He glanced at me, giving me a wink

Stephen let go of the mayor, returning to his spot just behind Adrik. He discreetly grabbed my hand, passing on the information he'd gotten when he touched the mayor. Unlike the administrator, who's demon was starting to attach firmly, the mayor's demon was barely hanging on. I wasn't sure if that had something to do with the fact that the first one could speak, but the second one made no sounds when it vanished.

Andrei, who had been quietly watching everything pushed what he could see to me. It was clear that the mayor had holes in his aura. He needed Viktor. The only problem was, we weren't sure how to get him to agree to it and we couldn't do it here, in front of everyone. We weren't sure if Kostya could hide himself and hide the effects of what he was doing when he and Viktor fixed someone. For us, it was visibly obvious. We weren't sure we could do it discreetly yet, so we didn't want to take that chance.

Viktor, to his credit, had somewhat come around since Stephen had forcibly helped him. He did, however, seem completely relieved to know that he was mostly off the h**k for his special services tonight when we discussed it prior to coming to the hotel. This time, I didn't get the feeling from him that he was avoiding us. It was more that he was overwhelmed with making sure we, mostly me, would be safe while we were at the event. Knowing he would somehow need to also use his gift while we were there was too much for him to handle.

We would figure out a way to help the mayor at a later date. We'd bought him some time tonight, but he was still vulnerable.

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Sephte

The mayor and Adrik continued discussing a few things, mostly options on how to meet in the future. Doug asked, “how long are you planning on staying tonight? It would be easy if you could meet Eric tonight” He glanced around the room once again, then turned back to Adrik. “I haven’t seen Henry. He should be here, but I haven’t seen him yet. It would work out well if you could talk to my district attorney without Henry seeing”

Adrik looked at Ivan. “Have you seen Henry yet?” Ivan shook his head no. Adrik then looked at Battista. He didn’t need to say anything. Battista simply said, “leave it to me,” and left. Doug and Adrik both chuckled, continuing on with their conversation.

It wasn’t two minutes later and Battista came back with Eric, the district attorney, in tow. While they were walking the remaining distance to us, I asked Misha if he could see if he could find out where Henry was. I told him to take Stephen’s place just behind Adrik if he needed a boost, but I suddenly had a nagging feeling about Henry’s whereabouts.

Judging by what little I knew of Henry, he wasn’t the type to turn down any sort of extra attention. Events like this one always came with plenty of extra attention for important people. It didn’t make sense for him to not be here, unless there was something more important for him to take care of

While Adrik was talking to Eric and Doug, I felt Misha move closer to us. He gently tugged on the sleeve of my dress, asking for my hand that was resting on the back of Adrik’s shoulder. I held it out for him, never turning to look at him. Eric, Doug, and Battista were none the wiser to what was happening behind us,

It didn’t take Misha very long to find Henry. It was the moment Misha had been fearing for months now. We caught Henry with his pants down. Literally. I felt Misha trying so hard not to laugh and it made it even more difficult for me to keep a straight face. I finally had to turn my head, trying to hide my face in Adrik’s shoulder. I caught sight of Misha, who was still behind us and we both almost lost it.

I somehow, miraculously, managed to get myself under control. When Henry was brought up again in the conversation, I innocently asked if he was married, suggesting that maybe his spouse was taking longer or perhaps ill. Adrik knew something was happening. He knew I didn’t ask questions that I didn’t already know the answer to.

“He is married, but his wife is here. I spoke to her earlier,” Eric said.

“Then perhaps he has a girlfriend,” I said. I said it in a way to make them think I was joking, but Adrik knew we’d caught him participating in extracurricular activities.

It was clear that Eric and Doug at least suspected something as well. They both looked at each other when I made the comment about the girlfriend. I picked up on it, asking them, “do you know who she is or do you only suspect?” They both looked at me, wide-eyed. “Now, now, gentlemen. This isn’t the first time anyone here has heard of indiscretions of married men. However, judging by your reaction to my earlier statement, made mostly in jest, you not only know who this other woman is, but she’s someone of some importance.”

Doug looked at me, then looked to Adrik. “Is she always so observant?”

Adrik looked at me, a small smile on his face. “More, usually. She’s been quiet tonight. But we all know she’s right. You can come clean on who the woman is or we can find out later.”

Eric sighed. “She’s one of the representatives for the city. Henry is trying to use her to get rid of Doug, as well as keep his job. They started the affair when Henry started to really believe he could get rid of Doug.”

“Rude,” I said.

“I assume his wife is none the wiser? What of her husband?” Adrik asked.

“His wife is clueless. Her wife is also clueless,” Eric said, smirking.

“Well, that’s a plot twist none of us were expecting. Suddenly no man wants to chastise Henry for making the lesbian switch teams. I did not expect that from him. High fives will abound once this gets out,” I said.

They all laughed loudly, which of course, caused everyone in the ballroom to look toward us. Before my panic could get any worse, the guys moved in

closer, blocking me from view, while Adrik tightened his hold on me. I silently thanked all of them.

“You wouldn’t be wrong in any other case,” Eric said, still laughing. “But apparently she has a bit of a reputation. She will apparently sleep with anything she thinks will get her more power and clout.”

“Her mother must be so proud,” I said, causing another round of laughter. “The question is, gentlemen, can we use this lovely nugget of information to our advantage? Who is her wife?”

“Her wife is a teacher, but she comes from a wealthy family, which is why the representative married her,” Doug said.

I scoffed. “That’s easy, then. Tell the wife, take away the family money and the rep goes away. Make it public that it was Henry and she stops helping him because essentially he’s the one that’s ruined her.”

“I f**king love you, princess,” Ivan told me silently.

Doug and Eric mulled over what I’d just said, then they both looked at Adrik I appreciation. Eric looked to me, asking. “do you need a job?”

“Sorry, boys, I’m available for consultations only,” I said, smiling at them.

Eric handed Adrik his card anyway. “If she ever changes her mind, I could use someone who’s this good at strategy.”

Adrik chuckled, but he still took the card. “I’m not sure you could afford her full-time, but maybe we can work something out on a case-by-case basis,” he said, smirking at them both.

Battista was enjoying this conversation as well. He said to me, in Italian, “I would like you all to accompany me to every event like this that I attend. I know you’ve been working on things that cannot be mentioned in mixed company all night, as well as this. I have to admit, I’ve never had so much fun at a so ul-su cking fundraiser before tonight,” he said, winking at me.

I responded, still in Italian, that I was happy I could be of service and that we did need to have a discussion at some point, but likely not here. He nodded his head, excusing himself from the conversation. Doug and Eric remained for a few more minutes, before excusing themselves as well, leaving us mostly alone once more.

Adrik looked at me, then glanced at Misha. “What did you two see?” he asked. I quickly shared the movie clip that Misha and I saw of Henry with his pants down with the representative on her knees in front of him. I would not have pegged her as a lesbian watching her do that.

He laughed. “Her definition of lesbian is very different from mine,” he said. Finally, Misha and I were able to laugh about it. Misha had shared it with Andrei already, so I showed Stephen while Adrik showed Ivan. Misha and Andrei teamed up to push it to Viktor. Even he got a laugh out of it.

“It was my worst nightmare finally realized,” Misha said.

“At least it wasn’t someone you really know. Like you weren’t looking for your sister and you found that instead,” I said, still laughing at the whole situation.

“Oh dear God, I’m never going looking for my sister now,” Misha said, his eyes the size of dinner plates. It caused another round of laughter from

everyone.

Strangely, it meant that no one else approached Adrik to talk to him. He looked busy. Either that, or every single person in the room had already come up to him. It could go either way, really. Whatever the reason, we enjoyed a few moments of just us, laughing at the high strangeness that seemed to be with us wherever we went now.

◆

King of the Underworld

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Sophie

We ended up staying for a little while longer. We decided we wanted to see how long it would take Henry to show up. Of course, there were beta made Even Vitally and Battista pot in on it. They'd been boxy making their men bets from the sidelines the entire night already

"Vitaliy, can I just tell you that I love you even more now that I know you enjoy doing this as well?" I said to him, in Italian, so Battista could also understand. Battista was quickly endearing himself to all of us as well. We ttill needed to have a conversation about him warning us next time he needed our services, but otherwise, he was proving to be extremely helpful to in. I could see why Vitaliy fostered that relationship over the years.

He smirked at me, raising his glass toward me. I caught myself thinking about how much I enjoyed having Vitaliy amund, which is something I omer thought I would say. The relationship between Vitaliy and Adrik was quickly approaching a normal father and son relationship as well. I was happy he decided to stay in the city a little longer. At this point, it felt like we could use all the help we could get.

Henry finally made an appearance at the fundraiser. Adrik won the bet pool, calling the precise minute that Henry would show up. The representa showed up not five minutes after him, looking quite flushed and somewhat messy, which of course, meant that all of us snickered as she walked by Even Eric caught our attention from across the ballroom, giving us a not so subtle nod as we all saw both of them arrive almost at the same time

Even though we were enjoying their arrival, I felt Ivan stiffen when he saw Henry walk past us. He shared what he was seeing with me and Adrik. We could clearly see that not only had his demon found an entry point, but it was now running the show. It was now the shadow behind Henry's face.

I grabbed Stephen's hand, sharing the information with him. He looked around, then leaned in toward me so he could say quietly, "is it wrong that I'm looking forward to that one? He's been on my shi t list ever since he decided he was smarter than us."

I laughed quietly. "I don't think that's wrong, Yoden. I think you are the only person that can knock him back a few pegs. In the best way possible," 1 said. His smile beamed at me as he squeezed my hand, effectively telling me how much he loved me.

Henry surprised us by approaching us shortly after he arrived. We all instinctively tensed when we saw him coming. Battista and Vitally were still standing with us, as well. As he walked toward us, we quickly came up with a strategy for how to handle him.

"I don't think Stephen needs to say anything this time. He's already after us, we don't need to give him another reason right now, "I said. I tried to send it to everyone at the same time. I wasn't sure if I was that good yet, but I was hoping I would be, just to save time. I saw Andrei reach over and touch Stephen's arm. Stephen looked at me, nodding once. He'd clearly gotten the message.

"That was impressive, princess. I also agree. I think we make him think he's still got the upper hand," Ivan said.

"Agreed. It's going to make his fall off the pedestal he's put himself on that much sweeter for me," Adrik said. I was thankful for his contacts. I knew without a doubt that his eyes had just switched to black. His anger was obvious.

I felt Ivan's bubble go up as soon as Henry made it to us. He walked to Battista and Vitaliy first, shaking their hands, making a comment about the length of time it had been since he'd seen either one of them.

"I'm surprised Battista knows Henry. And yet, I'm not surprised either. Is there anyone that man doesn't know?" I thought out loud. I heard a couple of them clear their throats to keep from laughing.

After Vitally shook Henry's hand, he looked straight at me, his face completely hard and tense. I nodded discreetly, indicating we'd already picked up on it. His face softened immediately and he gave me a wink. I couldn't be sure, but I think he was proud at that moment.

"Everyone look at Vitally. Just not at once. He's being a cheeseball. He can't not show how proud he is that we already know something is off with Henry,"1 told everyone.

They all managed to discreetly glance at Vitaliy. I could feel their amusement at his expression, but Adrik was surprised by it. I cut everyone else off and said to him only, "don't be surprised. He's very proud of you. He just su cks at showing it. That's what I'm here for. I'm gonna drag it out of him if it's the last thing I do."

Adrik chuckled, leaning over to kiss my cheek quickly before Henry walked up to us. Ivan's bubble was still up, but he had learned how to keep it from cutting me off from everyone, which I appreciated, I could feel Adrik's nausea as he shook Henry's hand, but it was fainter than normal with Ivan

being a barrier. I shook his hand as well, hoping I didn't get some massive download when I Touched him I'd already seen way more of him than I ever wanted to tonight.

We exchanged pleasantries and made excruciatingly boring small talk Finally, Henry brought up the muyor. "Any progress with that?" he asked quietly.

"We're still looking for information. Our source found a few things, but not enough yet. He's still looking." Adrik said. "What have you decided on the information on Rica

Henry was surprised at the question. He stammered for a moment, which made it obvious he was trying to lie "I haven't given it to him yet. I' not sure I can trust him or the DA. I'm thinking of going around him "

"Bubba, are you seeing what I'm seeing?" I asked, knowing he was likely also snooping through Henry's head as he talked.

"Oh yeah. He thinks his switch-hitting girlfriend can help him make the evidence we found on Ricardo fit Boss instead. He's already given her everything "be told me.

"He gave her everything right away, too. He's much dumber than I thought he would be," I responded. "I want to get closer to her, I would be willing to bet she's playing him for something. I want to know her angle."

"I completely agree, spider monkey."

"Going around him to who?" Adrik asked Henry. He already knew the answer. We all did. He just wanted to see if Henry would say it.

"Ive vetted one of the politicians. She can help us. I trust her," Henry said, confidently.

"I hope you've vetted her thoroughly," I said, with a hint of sarcasm that the guys picked up on. I could hear them all laughing in my head, but outwardly, not a single one of them cracked a smile.

[E30002]-Duplicate purchase

It caught Henry off-guard. He blushed. "I have. I'm very thorough, he said confidently.

"I would hope so. For her sake. Ricardo is a dangerous man. There's no telling what he's capable of," I said.

"You just made him clench a little, spider monkey," Andrei said, laughing

"Good. That was my hope. I want him a little nervous. Can you see where the switch-hitter is? Now I know I need to get closer to her. You're coming with

me."

"This has been the most fun I've had at one of these functions. In the history of ever."

King of the Linderworld

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Sephie

Once Henry left us, I explained that I felt I needed to get closer to Henry’s switch-hitter. We caught Battista and Vitally up on the plot twist imolving Henry that Misha and I had seen earlier. Battista looked at me, completely ammised. “I can introduce you, if you like.”

Adrik bristled immediately. “I don’t like that idea.”

Vitaliy agreed with Adrik. “I don’t either. Sladkaya, you don’t need to actually talk to her, do you? You just need to be close to her?

“Right. I don’t need to talk to her. But if Andrei and I can get close to her, we can take a peek and see what we can find out,” I said. Battista thought for a moment. I’d never seen him smile as much as he had tonight. He was absolutely gleeful at the events that had transpired so far

“You know a doctor from the hospital, no?” he asked me.

I nodded. “Dr. Williams.”

“I need his help. We’re going to discuss a new wing for the hospital, but we’ll need her input,” Battista said. “It’ll be obvious if all of you follow me, but Sephie has already been seen with just two of you. Sephie introduces me to the doctor, he and I go to the representative while Sephie stays in the background, but close enough she can get what she needs from the representative.”

“We should warn poor Dr. Williams that he’s part of our plot,” I said.

“Why would we do that? He’s getting a new wing out of this plot,” Battista said, very matter of factly. I just stood and stared at him for a moment. He laughed. “Money is a means to an end, Sephie. I will gladly spend it on something that will help the people of the city if it means I can be devious.” He grinned at me.

There really is something to this generational wealth thing

“Ivan and Andrei, go with her,” Adrik said. He pulled me closer, kissing my temple. “We’ll be close by. You’ll be able to see us the whole time,” he said quietly.

Battista offered me his arm as we set off to find Dr. Williams. As luck would have it, he wasn’t far from the representative. This should be easy.

Ivan showed me and Andrei what he could see as we got closer to the representative. Just like Henry, her demon had gained access and was the shadow behind her face. Unlike Henry, her demon was even more defined and more prominent, which I was beginning to learn meant that it had been running the show for quite some time.

Dr. Williams’ face brightened when he saw me approach him. “Hello again, Sephie,” he said, smiling warmly at me.

“Dr. Williams, I would like you to meet my dear friend Battista. You’re going to be very happy to meet him, in fact,” I said.

Battista extended his hand to Dr. Williams, introducing himself. He got right to the point, telling Dr. Williams that he had heard about what great work he did for both me and Ivan, which I didn’t even know he knew about, and he had decided that the hospital needed a new wing added on.

“Because I’m not a citizen, however, I believe we need to get some kind of approval to move this process forward?” Battista asked, innocently.

Dr. Williams looked shocked. He just stood in front of us for a moment, unable to speak. Ivan laughed. “Remember to breathe, Doc.”

Dr. Williams looked at Ivan, now snapped back to reality. His mind started racing, as his excitement level increased. He quickly looked around the ballroom, his eyes landing on the representative who wasn’t very far away. He pointed to her, saying, “she’s the person we need to speak to.”

“I’ll let you two do just that,” I said, winking at Dr. Williams. He objected, wanting me to come with them. I smiled warmly at him, saying, “I enjoy this anonymous thing, too. Ivan and I already have a legend told about us among the hospital staff. That’s enough for me.” He laughed loudly, but motioned for Battista to follow him to speak to Henry’s switch hitter.

As they walked to her and began talking. Andrei and I got to work. Before we started, I told Ivan he needed to lower his bubble. “You’re very quick now, Squish. I have full confidence you’ll catch anything before it gets to me, but I ne rd hull access to her to go fishing.”

I could feel his discomfort at the thought of lowering his bubble, but he did so. Begrudgingly

Andrei and I quickly snooped through her head as she was talking to Battista and Dr. Williams. She was quite excited for the possibility of getting a new wing on the hospital, but not for the reasons one would think. She was already planning on ways to launder money through the project, taking a significant portion for herself, of course. She was also planning on making the publicity around the project all about her, making it seem like she was the one that made this happen.

She knew everything about Ricardo. She was in touch with Ricardo, just as Herry likely was by now. She was following his orders when it came to anything to do with the city. She was going to be slightly more problematic to get rid of than I originally thought. But not impossible. She was just more connected than I thought she would be. I should’ve known.

Instead of waiting for Battista, we quietly left and went to join Adrik and the others once again. Ilya caught us walking back toward the group. “Sephie, something’s happening and I can’t explain it,” he said, urgently.

“To you?” I asked.

He shook his head no. “No, not to me. It’s the wait staff that’s here. I was by the door to the kitchen a moment ago. One of them is having some kind of attack. They’re trying to keep it quiet, but nobody knows what to do. The person is screaming that she can see ghosts.”

Ivan quickly told the group to go to the kitchen, as we followed Ilya. We tried to be as discreet as possible, but it was difficult given the size of the men I chose to keep company with. Most people noticed us leaving toward the kitchen, but their curiosity was short-lived as there was an auction starting right at the same moment.

When we got to the kitchen, there was one poor girl being held down by three others. She was still struggling, urgently telling people that she could see things no one else could see. They thought she was being violent and a danger to everyone around her. In truth, she was scared out of her mind.

After a quick glance to Ivan, he removed the three guys holding her down so she could sit up on her own. She was just a little thing. She was definitely younger than me, with blonde hair and pretty grey eyes. I’m sure when she wasn’t scared for her life, she was quite adorable. I knelt down ins front of her, as calmly as I could, asking her what she was seeing. “There’s an older man out there. He has a ghost standing next to him.”

“The older man, can you describe him for me?”

She described Vitaliy perfectly. It was Lena she was seeing.

“Is that all you’re seeing?” I asked.

“No. She glanced around the room, her eyes landing on Viktor before looking away. There’s another one,” she said in almost a whisper.

“She’s seeing Lena and Kostya. Get everyone else out of here.”

The room was cleared in a matter of seconds.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Jessica.”

“Hi Jessica. I’m Sephie. Can you stand up on your own, Jessica?”

She nodded, standing up. I stood up with her, but I was careful not to touch her. If she could see Lena and Kostya, I wasn’t sure what else she would be able to see. I didn’t want to scare her anymore than she already was.

“The other one you see, it’s a little boy, isn’t it?” I asked her.

Her eyes got wide. “You…You can see them too?”

“I can’t right now, but I have in the past. What I’m going to tell you might be difficult for you to believe right now, but you’re not seeing ghosts, Jessica. They’re angels 1 paused, mostly to gauge her reaction. Her eyebrows Timed as she thought about what I just said “The two men associated

” with those angels are very special men. Those angels watch over them There’s nothing to be scared of You have a special gif You can see things most people can’t

“Angels are real?” she asked.

“Very real. I have more than one that keep watch over me. One is just very busy and pops in and out as his schedule allows,” I said, smiling at her. “The other one is with me all the time” She scanned the room, her eyes landing on Ivan.

“He looks different from the others,” she said. She was trying to be quiet enough that Ivan wouldn’t be able to hear.

“He is different. He needs to be to stay with me all the time,” I said, I could feel her starting to relax. Her curiosity was overtaking her fear now. “There’s no reason to fear what you’re seeing. Jessica.”

“Nobody else would believe me. They called me crazy. They said I was on drugs or having a me ntal breakdown,” she said, tears welling up in her eyes. The urge to hug her was getting very strong

“Most people don’t believe what they can’t see, but you have a very special gift. Unfortunately, you’re also going to need to be very discerning with who you share your gift with. People don’t always understand. They see different as a threat, not something to be cherished. You’re going to have to protect yourself.” I said.

“How do you know? Why do you believe me?”

I reached out and touched her, letting her see everything she could see. “Because I’m different, too.”

King of the Underworld

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Adrik

Ilya had informed her that something was happening in the kitchen, so we all met Sephie there. There were guys holding down a girl in the back of the kitchen. She was struggling as much as she could, but she didn't stand a chance. She was little anyway, but the had three guys holding her.

I don't like this one hit. Every single one of us went on high alert, trying to figure out what was happening. Sephie gave one glance to Ivan and he promptly picked up every single one of the guys holding the girl down and tossed them aside.

Sephie knelt down in front of the girl, trying to find but more information. We were all surprised that she was seeing my mother and Kostya. I didn't even know my mother followed Vitaliy around.

In the way that only Sephie could, she calmed the girl down while explaining to her what she was seeing. She even told the girl that she had angels watching over her. I didn't expect her to out Ivan, but she did. The girl could clearly see there was something different about Ivan, but she looked fascinated by him rather than the fearful girl we saw when we walked in.

She asked Sephie why she believed her and Sephie reached out and touched the girl's arm. Her eyes went wide as she saw Sephie. Everything about Sephie. Sephie went to remove her arm, but the girl grabbed her hand. She was completely captivated by what she was seeing

"You're different from the others. How?" she asked Sephie.

"It's a very long story. My point, Jessica, is that not everything you see that's different from what we think of as normal is going to be bad. Did you have a bad feeling when you saw the angels earlier this evening?" she asked

The girl shook her head no. "No, it got bad when I told people what I saw. They called me crazy. I kept trying to tell them I wasn't and explain what i saw, but it got worse. That's when they held me down."

We could feel Sephie's sadness at the way this girl was treated. "You're going to need to be very careful who you tell about this from now on. For your own safety."

The girl nodded in agreement. "I don't want to tell anyone now. They're going to lock me up. My parents already think I'm crazy," she said quietly.

Sephie silently asked Ivan if he had a card she could give her. He handed her one. Sephie then handed it to the girl. "Jessica, if you ever get in trouble or they try and lock you up, I want you to call me."

Her eyes went wide again as she took the card from Sephie. "You would help me? You don't even know me."

"No, but I know what it's like to be going through what you're going through right now. It's not easy. Just knowing you have someone to call is sometimes very comforting," she said.

We could see the tears welling up in her eyes again. She looked at Sephie and quickly hugged her, holding on to her for dear life. Sephie chuckled, but she hugged her back, stroking her hair lightly as the girl worked to calm herself down.

"Can you leave tonight? I think it's best if you get out of here right now. You're safe at home?" Sephie asked.

"I'm safe at home; I live by myself. I was working tonight for extra cash though. This isn't my normal job," she said.

I walked to her, pulling what Battista, Vitally, and the rest of the guys had given me earlier for winning the bet pool on when Henry was going to show out of my pocket. "This should cover it. Go home. You don't need to be around those people anymore tonight," I said.

Her eyes went wide again. "You're like her," she said quietly. I couldn't help but smirk at her. I just nodded once.

Sephie turned and looked at Ilya and Misha, who were standing close by. "Would you two mind escorting her to her car?"

"Of course," Misha said.

Sephie turned back to the girl, who was still in shock. "They're going to make sure you get to your car safe. Are you okay to drive yourself home? We can take you home as well if you're worried about driving "

"No, I'm okay. You've done so much already. Thank you," she said. She quickly ran to get her bag and then came back. Misha and Ilya walked her out the back way to take her to her car,

As soon as they were gone. I wrapped my arms around Sephie. She leaned into me, her body completely relaxing as soon as she felt my touch. "I love you. You're incredible," I said, kissing the top of her head.

She sighed, looking up at me. "Once Misha and Ilya get back, I think it's time to go. I've had enough fun for one night." Her lips curled up into a half smile as she added, "at least the kind of fun you have in front of people. I have other fun activities I'd like to pursue once we're alone."

"I could not agree more," I said, leaning down to kiss her.

We walked back to find Vitaliy and Battista. We told them both that we were planning to leave once Misha and Ilya came back.

"Come to my house first. Battista can finish telling us his conversation with the representative and you can fill us in on everything else. It won't take long, but we need a place to speak freely." Vitaliy said in Russian. I wasn't happy with the idea of having to wait longer to get Sephie out of her dress, but I also wasn't mad at the opportunity to look at her in it for a little while longer. It was a conundrum.

Misha and Ilya returned, both of them had grins on their faces.

"Do I want to know what those grins mean?" Sephie asked.

"She was cute. She apparently talks when she's nervous. She was very nervous, Misha said.

"Cute enough to get her number?" Sephie asked, unable to hide her own grin.

"You should ask Ilya that question, not me," Misha said, his wide smile stretching across his face.

"Ilya, you dog. Did you get her number?" Sephie asked.

The shade of red that his face turned was a very clear answer. "What? She's really cute. I'm a sucker for short blonde girls," he said.

Sephie looked at him for a few moments, smiling at him. She finally said, "I'm just glad you feel good enough to consider it. She seems like a sweet girl, but you tell me the first moment she shows you otherwise." We could all feel her hackles going up as she felt protective of Ilya. It wasn't surprising in the least that she felt that way about the guys, but it did surprise me just a little that she already felt that way about flya. I was still happy to see it.

Vitally caught it too. He laughed. "Sladkaya, it's his job to protect you, not the other way around," he said. She just turned to look at him, squinting her eyes at him, silently reprimanding him for teasing her.

We all quietly left the fundraiser, making our way back to Vitaliy's house. The guys were all happy to ditch our jackets and ties while Sephie was only able to ditch her shoes. Sephie looked at all of us as we walked into Vitaliy's house. "It's just not fair that you're all still so handsome with just half

your tux on," she said, smiling at everyone.

"We can't help it, spider monkey. We just woke up like this," Andrei said, his wide smile across his face.

She walked to him, sliding her arm around his waist as we walked up the steps to the front door. "I just kind of love you," she said wistfully, leaning

her head on his shoulder.

King of the Underworld

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Adrik

Once we were all convened in Vitaliy's new office, we started to go over the evening's events. Battista and Vitaly weren't aware of what had happened when Stephen got rid of the things hanging around the hospital administrator and the mayor.

“Is that what made them cough uncontrollably?” Vitaliy asked.

“We think so. When it happened, the demons were almost desperate to find a way in. It really agitates them when they hear Stephen speak, Ivan said.

“I think the coughing is the body trying to reject it,” Sephie said.

“Does this mean the mayor is good to go now? We don't need to worry about him further?” Battista asked.

“Not exactly. He still has weaknesses that a different demon can exploit. Viktor is what fixes that, but we haven't figured out a way to do that subtly yet. It's visually very obvious when he fixes someone,” I said.

“It's visually obvious to you. Has anyone who is not you seen him do it yet?” Battista asked. “You all can see things no one else can anyway. Maybe the average person couldn't see it.”

He did bring up a valid point. Viktor hadn't used Kostya around anyone else outside our group yet. I glanced at Ilya, asking, “did you see it?

“Yeah, but maybe it was just because I'm his brother?” Ilya said.

“Or maybe Kostya wasn't thinking about being discreet,” Sephie said. She looked at Viktor, asking, “can you ask him if there's a way that he can do it so no one else would notice?”

Viktor was silent for a few moments. None of us had any idea that he could communicate so quickly with Kostya, but clearly he could. He said, “he thinks he can make it so it's not obvious. He still needs me to touch the person to make it happen, but that's easily explained.”

“Want to test it?” Sephie asked, grinning at him.

Viktor smiled his sweet smile that was reserved specifically for her. “Who did you have in mind?*

Sephie looked toward my father's men, Eduard and Sergel. “I'm really sorry, Sergei, but you need help. You've needed help since I met you. I just wasn't sure you'd let anyone help you.”

Sergei had been with my father since I was a kid. Not as long as Aleksei, but I'd still known Sergei for most of my life. He was a hard man, but he was a good man. Whatever Sephie had picked up on, I was sure that Sergei deserved help with it.

Vitaliy was surprised. He looked at Sephie then looked at Sergei, asking, “this is true?” Sergei was silent, but everyone could tell from his body language that he was clearly fighting something.

Sephie answered for him. “I don't mean to call you out in front of everyone, Sergei, but you're struggling. It's getting louder, which means it's harder for me to ignore.”

Andrei said, “I can hear it too. You don't have to deal with all that on your own, you know,”

Misha got curious and did his own searching when Andrei said something. “Sergei, you know that wasn't your fault, man.”

And then I knew what Sergei was still struggling to deal with. When I was a boy and the other bosses tried to get to my father through me the first time, Sergei was the one that was with me. The attack killed the driver, Petr. It almost killed Sergei. I somehow managed to survive, but that was the first time I found myself in my own darkness. I was out for days. My father never left my side and he never left Sergei's side.”

Sergei struggled to not blame himself for what had happened. He said he felt like he should've been able to see it coming. He was overprotective of me from that point until I hit adulthood. We all thought he had handled it, but clearly he was still carrying around guilt from it. Silently beating

himself up for it for almost my entire life.

Sephie went to him, placing her hand on his shoulder. “You are very good at your job. You always have been. You always will be. What happened that night is not a reflection of you. It needed to happen, Sergel. He needed to go through that experience so he could save me when the same thing happened to me. If he hadn't, I wouldn't be here,” she said quietly. Sergei looked at her, his eyes wide. He was trying to comprehend what she'd just told him.

Ivan walked closer to them. “Nor would 1, Sergei. He saved her so she could save me. That night had to happen. You kept him alive though. There's no way he could've survived that crash without you shielding him. You did exactly what you were meant to do.”

Sephie glanced at Stephen. He walked closer to her and Sergel. She whispered something quietly to Sergei. He nodded his head, then Stephen touched his arm. It took a few moments, but Sergei gasped loudly, like he just jumped into freezing water and his lungs were revolting. Stephen didn't let go Sephie recognized that Stephen was having to work to get Sergei cleared completely, so she grabbed his other hand, giving him the needed boost. It took a few more seconds and Sergei visibly looked better.

She looked at Viktor, who basically traded places with Stephen. Sephie looked at Battista, as well as Eduard, saying, “you two have to watch and let us know if you can see anything.” They both nodded. Battista looked completely fascinated by what was happening.

Viktor touched Sergei and we all clearly saw his aura, much like Andrei could see regularly. It was dim, with plenty of holes in it. Viktor removed his hand, waited for a moment, then put his hand back on Sergei's shoulder. We didn't see Kostya this time, but we could see the effects of Kostya being there. Sergei's aura lit up while all the holes were being filled in.

I glanced at Battista, asking, “can you see that?”

“See what? He just has his hand on his shoulder,” he said.

I looked at Eduard, asking the same thing. He said, “it just looks like Viktor has his hand on Sergei's shoulder to me.”

“That's all you saw the whole time?” I asked. They both nodded. Once Viktor was done, I said, “we have our answer then. They didn't see anything. I didn't see Kostya this time, but Viktor still lights them up when he touches someone.”

Sephie turned to Battista. “You didn't see anything other than Viktor's hand on his shoulder?”

“I saw nothing. I'm actually disappointed I saw nothing. I would like to see something.” Battista said.

“She can show you,” Misha said. “I'll help,” he said, offering her his hand.

“I might need both you and Bubba,” she said. She walked over to Battista, asking for his hand. She tried to push what it looked like for all of us to him. It took a few moments, as well as Andrei's help, but we saw Battista's eyes go wide as he finally saw what the rest of us saw.

“That is incredible,” he said.

Sephie offered to show Eduard as well, using both Andrei and Misha again. He cursed in Russian, having never seen anything like it in his life, which made her laugh.

“Well, now we know that we can fix someone discreetly. We just need to let Kostya know when he can leave his headlights on and when he has to turn them off. And Ilya's girlfriend is going to have to learn when to keep her mouth shut,” Sephie said, grinning at Ilya.

He laughed, saying, “you haven't even met Sasha and you're already trying to steal his job.”

King of the Linderworld

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Adrik

“Can you explain to me, like I’m a child, what you just did?” Battista asked.

Sephie chuckled. “Stephen helps to clear a person, so whatever heavy issue they’ve been struggling to deal with can successfully be dealt with, basically. In very general terms. Sergei, for example, has been struggling with something that happened over 20 years ago. He still carries a tremendous amount of guilt from it. Anytime you carry around heavy emotions for too long, they start to cause other problems. For Sergei, it was becoming overwhelming. It was all he could think about. He was beating himself up about it, blaming himself for what happened, doubting himself because he felt like it shouldn’t have happened. Stephen helped him create a pathway to get all of that out, if you will. Viktor, on the other hand, helps to strengthen his aura. It ensures that those negative thoughts and feelings can’t get a foothold in him again. He might still feel them from time to time, but they’ll move through him like they should, rather than illegally squatting in his psyche for 20 years. What you saw was Sergei’s aura, before and after Viktor fixed him.”

“Those holes that you saw before Viktor fixed him are where demons gain access to people. Big enough hole, weak enough person, the demon can get in and start running the show,” Ivan said. He glanced at Sephie, as they both had the same idea at the same time. She grinned at him, walking back to Battista.

“Wonder Twins, unite!” she said, motioning for Andrei and Misha to come back. She grabbed Battista’s hand again, using them to push what Ivan could see to Battista. “That’s what it looks like when a demon has gained access and is starting to run the show, Her demon has been there for a while. It’s very defined. Sometimes, they’re not as clearly defined. It’s like they’re fuzzy if they’re new. Hers has been there a while.”

“This is how you knew about my business associate?” Battista asked.

“One of the ways, yes,” Sephie said. I could feel her reluctance to reveal everything to Battista.

“You were right when you said we all complement each other. We’ve figured out how to work together to confirm whether someone’s demon is running the show or not. Because we’ve done it a few times now, the demons know who Stephen is. If they haven’t gained full access to a person, he can essentially scare them off. If they have gained access, that’s when the only choice is to break their psyche,” I said.

“Ah, yes. My business associate’s family was saddened to hear of his sudden massive stroke that left him in such a state. They were quite happy to have access to his finances, however,” Battista said, whimsically.

“This is what happened when the people were coughing uncontrollably? Stephen scared the demons off?” Vitaliy asked.

“Yeah. I’m not worried about the hospital administrator, but the next step would be to have Viktor fix the mayor. We did buy him some time with what we did tonight, but he’s still vulnerable,” I said.

“What about the DA?” Battista asked.

“He was fine. Nothing hanging on him. If there was a demon there, it was the most talented one we’ve come across yet. No one picked up on anything,” Ivan said.

“That’s also not to say that it won’t be an issue in the future. They were fine tonight, but that could always change. Depending on their own. decisions, Sephie said.

“What did you find out from the switch-hitting representative?” I asked Battista.

His mischievous smile crept across his face. “She’s more than happy to have me fund a new wing on the hospital. I suspect that she’s much the same as just about every politician on the planet, however. She’s going to figure out a way to make it all about her and take the credit for everything.” he said.

Sephie and Andrei looked at each other and laughed. “That’s exactly what she was thinking. You just left out the money laundering part. She’s gonna suck as much money out of the project for herself as possible,” Andrei said.

“Sucking is an activity that she seemingly enjoys,” Misha said. Somehow he managed to keep a straight face when he said it. Clearly, Stephen was coaching him on how to do so. The rest of us erupted into laughter.

Once the laughter died down, Sephie said, “she is connected to Ricardo already though. She has everything on him. He’s helping her use it against you,” she said, looking at me.

I wasn’t surprised, “She might be slightly more difficult to get rid of than we thought,” I said.

“What was your original plan? Vitaliy asked.

“Expose her affair with Henry. Her wife comes from a wealthy family. If we expose her affair, along with Henry, her wife divorces her, the family money goes away. She stops wanting to help Henry, as he’s basically the one that ruined her life,” I said.

“That could still work. It might not destroy her completely, because she’s likely to get help from Ricardo, but that could also work to our advantage. Expose that connection and she goes down when Ricardo goes down,” Battista said.

“Or she has an untimely ‘stroke.” It could go either way, really,” Stephen said.

We talked for a while longer, coming up with a plan for how to get Henry out of the picture, along with his girlfriend, I needed to keep the people of the city on my side; helping the mayor fight corruption was an easy way to do that. The less options that Ricardo had inside the city, the easier he would be to take down as well.

On the way back to the penthouse, I pulled Sephie closer to me. “I have to admit that was the most fun I’ve ever had at one of those events.”

“It did go much better this time. I’m very happy it went much better this time,” she told me, as her gorgeous smile stretched across her face.

“We’re all very happy it went better this time.” I told her, kissing her temple. “Although, I’m not going to lie, getting to look at you all night long dress made me even happier.”

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“I was thinking the same thing about you in that tux,” she told me, as she turned her face toward me just enough that she could see me out of the corner of her eye.

I reached over and ran my finger lightly down her neck, following the plunging neckline all the way down. I could feel her sending her warmth to me as she closed her eyes and enjoyed my touch.

“I don’t think you should wear any color but this one to any formal event ever again,” I said. “It looked like you were radiating love for me the entire night.”1 turned her toward me, pressing my lips to hers.

“The color of the dress just made it obvious for you so you noticed it for the first time. I’m always radiating love for you, no matter what I wear,” she said, reaching up and pressing her palm against my cheek.

My breath caught, which made her smile even wider at me. I was suddenly desperate to get home and get her alone.

King of the Underworld

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Sephie

Adrik walked to the couches, throwing his tuxedo jacket and tie over the back. He removed his cuff links as he walked back toward me, depositing them in his pocket. It gave him a reason to look me up and down one more time without being blatantly obvious about it. As he was walking toward me, I reached up and pulled my hair down from the intricate ponytail that Ms. Jackson had put it in. I still had no clue how she figured out how to make a ponytail look so glamorous, but she did.

He groaned quietly as he watched my hair fall over my shoulders. "I love your hair when it's out of control," he said. He stopped in front of me, his hands running up my arms, stopping on either side of my neck. He studied me for a few moments before leaning down to kiss me. It was much quicker than I was hoping for. "Come, I want your contacts out," he said, grabbing my hand and leading me back to the bedroom. "I would like to see your eyes match that dress one last time."

"Who am I to deny you?" I asked, laughing quietly as I followed him to the bedroom. He stood behind me, watching me in the mirror as his hands roamed over my hips and a ss while I took my contacts out. I looked at him once 1 was finished, asking, "you're not going to take yours out?"

He smiled at me. "I already did. When we were at Vitaliy's house. I couldn't stand them any longer."

"You're so much smarter than me," I said to him, impressed.

He chuckled. "You're getting used to yours better than I am. They still make my eyes itch," he said, brushing my hair back from my neck so he could kiss it. It sent waves of warmth throughout my body, causing me to moan quietly. He turned me around to face him, his sweet smile letting me know that my eyes were deep blue. "I still can't believe how much I miss seeing them change when you have to wear your contacts for any length of time,"

"I love that you're still so fascinated by them. I would've thought you would be used to it by now and bored with it," I said, enjoying the look of wonderment on his face that he had every time he watched my eyes change.

"I doubt very seriously that will ever happen," he said, pressing his lips to mine kissing me quickly, then kissing first one cheek, then the other. "You keep finding new ways to fascinate me with them," he said, his lips pressing to my forehead. I closed my eyes, just enjoying the sweet moment with him. I felt his lips press to one eyelid, then the other.

"Well, in that case, I hope I never stop," I said, smiling at him without opening my eyes. He grabbed my hand, leading me out of the bathroom. When I opened my eyes, I saw him still enjoying looking at me in this dress. It made me smile to see him enjoying it so much. "I wouldn't mind getting this dressed up now and then if this is always going to be your reaction," I said.

He groaned quietly again. "If we have as much fun as we did tonight, I might start attending more of these terribly boring functions just to make you get dressed up more often. I would not be mad at that. The people of the city would not be mad at that either. They couldn't take their eyes off you," he said, pulling me closer to him. He put the hand he was holding around the back of his neck. He slid his hand down my other arm, picking it up and placing it in the same position on the other side. He glanced down at my barely covered cleavage, staring at it for a few moments. "Have I mentioned how f**king phenomenal your bo obs look in that dress?" he asked, his fingers tracing lightly over the exposed skin of my breasts.

I giggled. "That might've been the other selling point," I said. "I actually couldn't stop staring at my bo obs in the dressing room. The guys felt my happiness over how good they looked. They made me come out and show them."

Adrik chuckled. "You're two for two with your choice of dresses. I thought the last one was perfect, but this one might be my favorite."

"You're only saying that because I didn't have to starve myself for weeks before this one," I said, grinning at him.

He laughed. "You're still too skinny from being hurt." Just to illustrate his point, he grabbed me around my hips lifting me off the floor like 1 weighed. nothing. I squealed, which made him smile. "See? It's too easy."

"Or maybe you're just ridiculously strong," I said, wrapping my arms around his neck tighter as he continued to hold me off the floor. He wrapped his arms all the way around me, holding me tightly.

"Or maybe I just love you," he said, looking up at me. I could see the love he had for me. It was obvious. I was the only woman he looked at the entire night. If a woman was speaking to him, he would glance at her to keep from being rude, but otherwise, he only had eyes for me. It had been that way since I first met him. He never once changed.

I held his face in my hands, completely smitten with him. 1 sighed. I did sometimes wonder what I'd done to deserve him. He was perfect in every way. I pushed my warmth to him, knowing my eyes were deep blue. His hold on me got lighter. "I love you. Every little thing about you is perfect for me," 1 said, as I pressed my lips to his.

He slowly lowered me back to the floor as he deepened the kiss. Once I was standing on my own again, his hands roamed over my back, down to my a ss, pulling me closer to him. I slid my hands down his chest, unbuttoning his shirt as I went. While I loved seeing him in his tux all night, I adored seeing him with his shirt off. I untucked his shirt, pushing it off his shoulders, my hands sliding along the well defined muscles of his arms and chest.

He stepped back from me as he grabbed both my hands, placing them by my side. "I've been waiting all night for this," he said, his tweet smile on his face. He ran his hands up my arms and over my collar bones. He smiled when his hand ran over the necklace that had belonged to his mother. He slipped his fingers under the material at my shoulders, pushing the dress off my shoulders. He picked up one hand, pulling the sleeve off that arm, then moved to the other.

He was clearly satisfied finally seeing my na ked breasts after having been given just a hint of them for the entire evening. His hands covered each one. gently massaging them before moving down my stomach to push the dress the rest of the way down my hips. He hadn't seen my choice of panties until he pushed the dress all the way down. He inhaled sharply when he saw that I was wearing nothing but a G-string-

"You've been virtually na ked under that dress for the entire evening," he said. He didn't know whether to be slightly angry with me or impressed. He took one step back, looking at me from head to toe. "Turn around," he said, almost sternly. It sent a shockwave straight to my nether regions. I turned around, loving the loud groan that escaped as he looked at my a ss. "I'm glad I didn't know that's what you were wearing underneath, It would've been torture," he said, his hands on my hips. He pulled me back against him, almost forcefully. I loved it. I gasped quietly as his hands were on me once more, leaning into him.

His lips found my neck while his hands massaged my breasts. I lifted my arms behind his head, giving him full access. I loved the feeling of his warm chest against my back. I kept my shoulders against his chest, but moved my hips far enough away that I could slide my arms in between unbuttoning his pants without having to turn around. He laughed. "You're quite talented, solnishko," he said, nibbling on my neck.

I heard his pants fall to the floor and he wrapped one arm around my waist, pulling me back into him. I could feel his hardness pressing into my back. Finally, he couldn't take it any longer and turned me around to face him. His lips were instantly on mine. I pushed his boxer briefs off, not wanting anything between us. He barely made an effort and my panties were ripped off. What little of them there was to begin with, anyway.

He slowly walked us to the bed, his lips never leaving mine. His kiss was slow, but it burned with his desire for me. He reached down, picking me up and wrapping my legs around his waist so he could climb on the bed without breaking the kiss. It made me giggle and hold onto him tighter.

As soon as I was laying on my back, he pressed his hips into me, causing me to moan as I felt his hard co ck against my pu ssy. He teased me a few more times before slowly sliding all the way in. It sent waves of fire over my entire body. I'd been waiting all night long for this moment. I exhaled loudly as he filled me up.

His lips found mine once again. He gently, but firmly, pressed his hips into mine. He was slow, deliberate with everything he did. Almost like he didn't want the night to end. I could feel him pushing his desire to me, but he managed to control it this time. It was enough that it was pushing me toward the edge, but he wasn't losing control. I loved it.

I was so lost in how much I loved him, how he made me feel, how he knew just what I needed. I could feel an orgasm building already and he was still barely moving. He pulled back enough to look at me, his s*xy smirk on his face. He was trying to see if I really was losing control the way he thought I was. I couldn't do anything but smile at him as I moaned, my body exploding into an orgasm. His lips were on my neck and chest as his hand squeezed my breast, then came to rest in my favorite spot just over my heart. It sent more waves of fire through my entire body, causing my body to spasm once again in another orgasm.

I couldn't get enough of him. I wanted more. I worked my hips against him, demanding more. He responded immediately, thrusting into me. Where he had been slow and deliberate, now he was intense and almost desperate. My body craved more, my hips matching his rhythm. I could feel another orgasm building, even more intense than the last one. He sent me crashing over the edge multiple times before finally finding his own release.

He collapsed on top of me, his breaths heavy, I wrapped myself around him, holding him tightly. I wouldn't have minded staying like that for the entire night. He went to move off me, but I held him tighter. "Not yet," I said. He chuckled, but relaxed again, happy to stay there a little longer.

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 468

King of the Underworld

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Sephie

I woke the next morning, still completely tangled up in Adrik's embrace. He was holding me just as tightly as I was holding him. I'm surprised either one of us could move at all the entire night. I loved every second of it.

He felt me stirring and loosened his grip on me slightly. "Good morning," he said without opening his eyes.

I couldn't help but laugh a little at his reluctance to wake up. "I think we need to go back to the house again this weekend. We could all use a break again," I said.

"I will not argue with that plan," he said.

I kissed him gently, trying to coax him awake. He just wrapped my leg around his hips tighter and tightened his hold on me. I giggled. "Why are you so tired? Did you get new level zapped and you're not telling me?"

"No, I'm not that tired. I just don't want to move from right here. I want to spend the day trying to recreate last night. Repeatedly," he said, opening his eyes just enough that he could barely see me.

"I will not argue with that plan," I said, pushing my warmth to him.

That was all the encouragement he needed. He was back on top of me before I even realized what had happened. I laughed at his exuberance. He finally opened his eyes, his handsome smile across his face as he looked down at me. He leaned down, kissing me sweetly as he slid inside me slowly. I moaned into his mo uth, caught by surprise at how quickly he could make my body explode in pleasure.

I felt the pull in my chest that was from him as he watched me get lost in the feeling of him. He could push the limits of my endurance and he did so regularly, but it was almost more than I could handle when he took it slow. I pushed everything I was feeling to him, wanting him to feel exactly what he was doing to me. I heard him exhale as he breathlessly said my name and I knew he wasn't going to keep control for very long.

"Look at me," he said. He said it gently, but firmly. I felt my pu ssy clench around him when he said it. He noticed, smirking at me. I looked at him, loving the look of fascination on his face as he watched whatever show my eyes were giving him. He kept his rhythm slower, but he gradually increased the intensity, knowing that it would drive me absolutely crazy, It only took a few minutes and I was struggling to keep my eyes open as 1

was overcome with pleasure.

He didn't take his eyes off mine the entire time. His gaze was intense, like he was reading my soul as he made love to me. The first time he'd done it was somewhat unnerving for me, but I found myself loving it this time. Every piece of my soul already belonged to him.

My body exploded into orgasm after orgasm until I finally pushed him to his limit. He collapsed on top of me once again. I wrapped myself around him again, still feeling like I wanted to hold him as tightly as possible, for as long as possible.

"I don't know why, but I feel like I don't want to let go," I said.

"That might be from me. That's how I always feel about you," he said. He sat up so he could look at me.

"Really?"

"Really. It's especially strong after we have s*x, but I feel it anytime I'm touching you. It's partly why I can't keep my hands off you."

I thought for a moment, a small smile on my face. "I still sometimes have no idea of the effect I have on you," I said.

"You have no idea of the effect you have on anyone," he said, his wide smile stretching across his face.

I squinted my eyes at him. "What do you mean?"

"Not a single person could take their eyes off you last night and you had no idea," he said.

"Shu t up."

He laughed. "It's true. I'm surprised it didn't make you panic. Anytime you went anywhere, all eyes were on you. I might've really loved that, not gonna lie,"

"Shu t up."

"It's true. You can ask any of the guys. Vitaliy's men saw it too. So did Vitaliy. They'll all tell you. People couldn't take their eyes off you. I can't blame

them. I couldn't either."

I grinned at him. "I do love that you only have eyes for me. Especially when other women are making a spectacle of themselves to try and get your attention." I reached up and ran my fingers through his dark hair as we were talking.

"You are always the most beautiful woman in the room, No matter what you do," he said, pushing the curls back from my face. "I might love that about you. My evil side delights in the fact that you're mine. While everyone else wishes they were me."

"There are plenty of reasons for them to wish they were you. Not just because of me. I might be the icing on the cake, but that's it," I said, laughing.

"You are the icing. You are the cake. You are the ingredients for the cake, too. You're everything," he said, his handsome smile making me love him just a little more. He sat up, pulling me up with him. "Come. The guys are in the kitchen now and you smell like s*x. You need a shower before you're allowed around them."

"How did you know they were in the kitchen already?" I asked, as we walked to the bathroom.

He stopped, thinking about it. "I don't know. I just know."

I looked at him, trying so hard not to smile. "You li ar! You said you didn't get new level zapped."

His eyes went wide, thinking he had really made me mad. "I didn't know!"

I couldn't hold it in any longer. I laughed at him. He immediately relaxed. "You can feel them, can't you?"

He thought about it, then nodded his head in agreement. "Yeah, I can tell you the order they came to the penthouse this morning, even. I don't know why I know that information, but I know that information."

1 giggled as he pulled me under the warm water of the shower. "I think each time we do something new, it strengthens the connection between everyone. We've figured out how to communicate with each other, then everything came together last night. It's not the first time we've all worked together, but it was the first time we did it multiple times in one night."

"I did notice that our demons seemed quieter last night. Even around Henry and the switch-hitter, they were quiet. I can't figure out why that would

be."

I thought for a minute as he worked on washing my hair. "I hadn't thought about it, but you're right. They were much more active with Battista's associate than they were last night. But there were more demons there last night than with Battista's associate. That don't make sense. It does seem like they were hiding." It suddenly hit me. I turned around to face him. "What if they knew that girl could see them and they were hiding from her?"

"Could she see them, though? She didn't notice anything about Stephen or the Wonder Twins. It was only you, me, and Ivan that she saw something different about. Ivan has wings, even. Are you sure she was seeing our demons?"

"Well, no. I'm not. But I bet I know who is," I said, grinning.

"Andrei. That kid can't help himself sometimes. Which actually works to our advantage. I bet he knows," he said. He was clearly amus prospect of Andrei snooping through that poor scared girl's head.

"He's gonna be so embarrassed," I said. Can't say I wasn't excited about this pending conversation….

Sephle

The guys were all laughing as we walked into the kitchen. They all looked to me, like they knew I was about to make their morning even better. I was taken aback by their knowing glances.

“We can feel your f**kery, gazelle. I, for one, am very excited about this development in my life,” Misha said.

Adrik caught my eye, his mischievous grin slowly creeping atross his face. “Apparently, I’m not the only one,” he said, kissing my temple.

“Not the only one for what?” Ivan asked.

“He can feel all of you the same way I can now. He knew you guys were here before I did this morning. He can tell you the order you came up, even,” I said.

They all looked at Adrik skeptically, like they didn’t believe him.

“Ivan, Stephen, Andrei, Viktor, Misha,” he said.

“Okay, so new level unlocked,” Ivan said, laughing.

“We were talking this morning. It feels like the connection is getting stronger each time we do something new,” Andrei said. “It used to only get stronger for Sephie, but now I think it’s getting stronger for all of us.”

“I agree, Bubba. I think you guys pick up more each time. Not just with me anymore, either. You’re picking up more between each other now, too,” I said.

“We were talking this morning too. It felt like our demons were quieter last night at the fundraiser than they were at the meeting with Battista. We can’t figure out why. There were more demons last night than at the meeting with Battista. It doesn’t make sense they’d be quiet last night,” Adrik said.

“I noticed that too. I was going to bring it up this morning. Any theories?” Ivan asked.

“Sephie thinks it might have something to do with that girl that could see my mother and Kostya. Maybe they knew and were hiding from her?” Adrik said.

I looked at Andrei. “Bubba, did you by chance do any snooping with her? Do you know if she could see everything? Or is she more like you, in that she can only see the good?” I asked.

“I did look when I saw her zero in on Ivan. It worried me, so I ted to see what she saw,” Andrei said. He looked at Ivan. “You’re going to be shocked, man. I didn’t know how much you wanted Battista know, so I didn’t bring it up last night.”

He pushed what he saw when Jessica looked at Ivan, then me, then Adrik. She couldn’t see our demons, but she could very clearly see the outline of a pair of wings behind each of us. My dad had told me that Ivan’s wings were black, white, and red. Jessica could only see the white in his wings, but they looked different to her than what Kostya and Lena looked like. She saw the same difference when she looked at me and Adrik.

We all stood in stunned silence for a few moments. Andrei and Misha worked together to push it to Viktor and Stephen at the same time.

I finally got over my shock and looked to Ivan. “I wonder if she’ll be able to eventually see how much cooler yours are than everyone else’s.” It helped snap him back to reality as well. Adrik quietly slid his arm around my waist. I felt the pull in my chest from him, knowing he was thinking about how much more this made him love me, just as I was for him.

“She saw Boss’s mom and Kostya the same way, but they look different than you guys,” Andrei said. He pushed us the images of both Lena and Kostya that she had seen. “She called them ghosts because she didn’t think anyone would believe her and she wasn’t even sure if angels were real,” he said.

“The ghost angle makes sense, since you can see through them,” Stephen said after seeing what Andrei was sharing with all of us.

“It doesn’t explain why our demons were quiet, though. Just to bring it back around to that,” Ivan said. “I would like to know why that is.”

“Maybe they were quieter because you listened to them last time. They didn’t have to shout this time,” Misha said. “The more I used my gift at first, the more subtle it got. But it was also clearer. Maybe that’s what’s happening. They were louder the first few times, you got the message, now they can be subtle.”

I noticed Viktor getting a glazed over look, but I didn’t feel like he was uncomfortable with this conversation. I was hyper-aware of his comfort level when it came to any discussion of our demons. He was getting better, but I know he still didn’t like it.

He joined us back in the present moment, surprising everyone by saying, “Kostya said he thinks Misha is right. He’s not completely sure, but from what he can tell, Misha’s on the money.”

“Did everybody just hear that? I just want to make sure. Viktor, you might need to repeat it a few more times. Just to be sure we all heard it,” Misha said, his wide, handsome smile across his face.

“Your first time is always the most memorable,” Ivan sald, raising his eyebrow at Misha. The rest of us could do nothing but laugh. Misha’s cheeks got red, but he was laughing with the rest of us. I walked to where he was sitting, hugging his neck while standing behind him. He held onto my arms as we tried to get our laughter under control.

Stephen, always the analyst, was quietly contemplating our conversation and everything that had happened recently while I started breakfast. Finally, he looked up at everyone. “I think we should have another conversation with Dario. I want to make sure we didn’t miss anything the last time. It’s been a while since we’ve been in the same room as him and Sephie was the only one that could pick up on something extra the last time.”

I studied Stephen for a few moments. “Is there a reason this popped into your head now, Yoden? Have you been thinking about Dario or He just randomly popped into your head this morning?”

“He’s come up a few times for me the last week or so. I just can never find the right time to bring it up. I don’t necessarily think we missed anything before, but I also want to make sure. Especially if he goes free at the end of this. We need to make sure he’s really worthy of that ending,” he said.

“I agree,” I said, looking to Adrik.

“We can talk to him. Now that Armando is gone, he can be moved to a more comfortable room, since he’s going to be here for a while longer,” he said.

“Today is a good day to do it. No one else will be in the office,” Viktor said.

“Has anything else come up for you about Dario, Yoden? Just that you want to make sure we didn’t miss anything?” I asked. There was always a reason that things like this seemed to “randomly” come up. We just had to find the reason.

Stephen thought for a few moments, analyzing his own thoughts, “I was also thinking about how broken his mind already is. I want to know more about why that is. Part of me wonders if it was an act, part of me is curious if it was Massimo or Sal that did it to him. And if so, how. There’s just something that feels slightly off, but I don’t know if it’s Dario or something else.”

“You’re wondering if maybe he was acting broken to get our sympathy? Adrik asked. Stephen nodded. Even Adrik was thoughtful for a few moments. “I’m the one that made the decision that he could go free,” said. He looked at me. “You were struggling with your anger after being told that Sal and Armando were going to get into a fight over you. It’s very possible I missed something.” He thought for a minute mere, then looked at Viktor. “Have him moved to a more comfortable room than where he’s at this morning. We’ll go talk to him tomorrow afternoon, when we get back.”

Viktor nodded his head, pulling his phone out to give the necessary orders. Misha asked, “you want to go to the house this weekend?”

Adrik nodded this time. “I think we could all use a break. That seems to be the one place where we can all turn everything off for a bit. Now, we need it even more.”

Ivan’s sly grin turned up one side of his mouth. “You’ve been hanging around the princess. You’re getting really good at that.”

We were now all slightly on edge, wondering if we’d missed something before. I was grateful that Stephen had thought of it, as the rest of us had mostly forgotten about Dario. We hadn’t needed him for information, so he was just waiting until we took care of the rest of the bosses before he could go free. With the return of Niko and Vito possible in the very near future, it would help to know everything about Dario.

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Adrik

That afternoon, once we'd arrived at the house, Viktor surprised the rest of in by asking if he could take Sephie for a walk, just the two of them, while she was upstairs for a minute.

"I still have making up to do with her from everything that's happened," Viktor said.

"You do," Ivan agreed. "But that's the best place to do it. Make sure you tell her everything, though. She already knows anyway, but she needs to hear you say it."

Viktor chuckled. "You're not the only one that's told me that recently," he said. Apparently, he and Kostya spoke quite often. Much more than the rest of us were aware of. If he was getting that kind of advice from him, I wasn't going to be mad about it though.

Sephie walked into the back room, where the rest of us were. Her smile made the room brighter as her eyes landed on me. It didn't seem to matter how long we spent together, she was always happy to see me after even the shortest time away from me. I loved it. I couldn't get enough of it..

"Sestrichka, I was hoping you'd like to take a walk with me?" Viktor asked. I don't think I'd ever seen him so timid. He was nervous, but at least he was finally trying to make things truly right once again.

"I would love to, Papa Bear. But now I have to go get my coat. Shockingly, I'm cold," she said, grinning at all of us before jogging back upstairs.

"Her lung is getting better and better. She's acting more like her old self," Stephen observed.

"Yeah, I was going to try the short distance with her again in the morning if you want to come too," Misha said. "Hopefully this time she'll be able to catch her breath better, but at least I know what to do now if she can't."

"Don't worry, Misha. It's terrifying for all of us when that happens," I said. Watching her struggle to breathe was still one of the most horrifying things I'd ever seen. It's the biggest reason that I was able to turn off my bloodlust so quickly with Armando. I could feel her struggling. Everything else shu t off and there was only concern for her.

She walked back in, now with her coat on. She walked to me, leaning down to kiss me before leaving with Viktor. I thought back to how shy she used to be about any sort of affection in front of the guys. It made me smile to see her so comfortable.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do while we're gone," she said as they walked out the back doors. She slid her arm through Viktor's as they walked around the pool toward the gardens, then stopped to look at a few of the rose bushes, noticing that there were the tiniest little buds starting to appear. I could feel the warmth from her smile as she said something to Viktor, making him laugh, as they continued toward the woods.

"He has no idea how lucky he is that she's so forgiving. I would've made him suffer a lot longer," Ivan said.

I laughed. Mostly because I agreed. "I think we all would have. It's been really hard on her, especially since she's so connected to all of us now. She's not with him and she feels that every time we're all together. She said it's a constant reminder of his rejection. She understands why he chose the decision he did, but she's struggled with how long it's taken him to be okay with the rest of us," I said.

"It's been difficult for all of us, but not to the same level as her. It's obvious to us that his connection is the weakest, too," Andrei said.

"Maybe it will get stronger over time. He's arguably been the slowest out of all of us. Maybe his connection will keep slowly increasing. It seems like he's talking to Kostya very regularly," Stephen said, in his usual reasonable manner.

"For her sake, I hope you're right. As much as she worries that she's holding you all back from living your own lives, she really enjoys the connection she has with all of you," I said.

"She does what now?" Ivan asked, completely surprised.

"She's worried she's holding you back from living your lives. From finding girlfriends. She thinks Stephen will have an easier time, but only just barely. She brought up the conversation we had about it in Italy, when Ivan pointed out how difficult it was going to be to find suitable girlfriends now that

you know her and see what we have. It doesn't seem to matter how much I reassure her, she's still worried she's holding you back," I said.

Ivan looked like he'd made a connection. "That's what she was worried about," he said. We all looked at him, waiting for an explanation. "The last time Viktor had a 'moment,' when she broke down you were downstairs talking to him. I could feel her worry about Viktor, but then something else came up. I asked her about it. She admitted there was something else, but she didn't want to talk about it then so I let it drop. She's been really happy since, so it slipped my mind."

"It's been on her mind for a few weeks now. She feels guilty that you can feel everything she can feel, especially when the falls apart like the did that night. She doesn't know how to turn it off to spare you from having to feel what she feels. She thinks she's condemned all of you to constantly be in turmoil with her," I said.

They were quiet for a few moments, mulling over what I'd just told them. I could actually feel their own inner turmoil, trying to find a way to reassure Sephie that she was wrong.

"I think she's been living with the emotional turmoil for so long that it almost feels like a burden to her sometimes, especially when she can't turn it off or struggles to get her emotions under control. She doesn't realize she's giving us a gift to be able to feel that along with her," Stephen said. "Especially for me. I spent so many years just completely numb to feeling anything, just trying to survive. Being able to feel what she feels reminds me I'm alive and that there's something to live for."

"Same," Ivan said.

"I don't think she realizes that she's also showing us how to get control of our emotions when she shares what she's feeling with us," Andrei said.

"You can feel that too?" I asked.

Andrei nodded his head. Misha agreed with him as well. "It's gotten clearer more recently. It wasn't that way in the beginning, but the more connected we are to her, the more it feels like she's showing us how to control everything. Even when she fell apart that night. It wasn't overwhelming like she thinks it was. At least not for me. Every time, it feels like she's showing me how to handle it when it happens to me," Misha said.

"I've tried to tell her all of this before, but I think she'll believe it if it's coming from all of you, so make sure you tell her. She wants you all to be happy and to have what she and I have," I said.

"She's still showing us how good it can be when it comes to that too. We all see how special your relationship is. It was painfully obvious how different it was, even in the beginning, when I was with Tori. I couldn't help but compare. Maybe that wasn't fair to Tori, but I couldn't help it,"

Andrei said.

"Maybe it wasn't fair, but you were already at a disadvantage with that hot mess," Ivan said, which helped lighten the mood. None of us missed having Tori around, especially not after what she'd done.

"But that's my point though. She's showing us how much better it is to just wait until the right one shows up. Along with how to stay grounded while feeling as intensely as she does. She thinks she's burdening us when in reality, she's making us all better for when the right ones do show up for us," Andrei said.

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Sephie

I slid my arm through Viktor's as we walked around the pool. I stopped to inspect the rose bushes at the edge of the gardens as we passed, noticing the tiniest of little buds starting to appear. It was a sign of warmer days ahead, which made me quite happy to see.

"I'm going to be counting down the days to when I can stop wearing a coat outside now," I said as we continued toward the woods,

Viktor laughed quietly. "You would struggle to live in Russia during the winter," he said.

"You are not wrong there. I wouldn't have survived, I would've frozen to death. I know it. I was not cut out to be that hardy," I said.

He squeezed his arm around my hand. "I think you're more Russian than you give yourself credit for, Sephie. You've survived more than most people 1 know. You're hardier than you think," he said, looking down at me. The look of pride on his face was unmistakable. I couldn't help but grin at him.

We walked in comfortable silence for a while, before my curiosity got the better of me. "How does Ilya like working for Vitaliy?"

A wide smile stretched across his face. "He's very happy. He gets along well with the other guys, even though they're much older than he is. Aleksei is catching up his training, which makes them both happy. Ilya is happy to learn more, Aleksei is happy to teach more. Vitaliy is happy to be rid of his little flowers."

"And once again, we saved the world," I said, wistfully. "So how likely do you think it is that he'll call the girl from the fundraiser last night?" I asked. I tried to sound innocent, but he knew this was likely going to make an appearance on the whiteboard.

"He'll call. Ilya struggles to be single. I think it's the baby in him. I'm not that way. Sasha is not that way. I think Ilya likes having someone to fuss over him," he said.

"As long as he reciprocates," I said. "Nobody likes a selfish dude."

"Oh, he does. I think that was part of the problem with the last girl. The one that almost broke him. He kept giving, thinking it would fix everything. She kept taking." he said.

"My offer still stands. I'll happily kick her a ss," I said,

"I don't think you need to worry about her. You have enough to worry about without fighting Ilya's battles for him, too. He got away from her. That's

what matters."

I scoffed. "You're so reasonable. It's soooo boring." I said as dramatically as possible, getting a belly laugh out of him.

"I think both Ilya and Sasha would agree with you on that one. I've always been the serious one," he said. We came out of the woods and walked to my favorite spot by the lake.

"I can believe that. You're the oldest and always have been. Makes sense that you'd naturally fall into the father figure role for everyone. You're so good at it. You've had plenty of practice. Remind me to thank Ilya for being irresponsible when you were kids," I said, grinning at him.

He laughed. "It probably has something to do with it. It doesn't explain how you're so good at taking care of all of us, though. You were an only child. Aren't only children supposed to be spoiled and bratty?"

"I fail to see why you phrased that like a question, Papa Bear. Have you met me? Have you not seen how I refuse to use my own legs to walk as much as possible? Are you unsure of what spoiled and bratty really mean? It's a translation problem, isn't it?"

He reached out and pushed me over gently. "I know what it means. Maybe you are a little bratty, but I would not call you spoiled. You're so thoughtful is what I mean. Even when I was being an assho le, you were more concerned with how it affected the other guys than you were with how it affected you. Even though I know you're struggling with it more than they are."

I was quiet for a moment, trying to think of how I wanted to respond. I was surprised he actually admitted he was an as shole. "You have more history

with them than you do me. I'm your boss's girlfriend. They're your brothers. I'm also the reason things got so weird. Literally. From the very beginning. It's all because of me. If you need someone to be mad at, it should be me. They haven't done anything wrong."

He reached over and pulled my left hand out of my pocket. "You're more than his girlfriend, Sephie," he said. He held my hand up to look at the ring "And you're more than that to the rest of us, too. This should be a constant reminder to you of that fact."

I stayed quiet, looking at my ring, but still thinking about how I'd been the catalyst for their lives to change so completely.

"You're still worried that me asking to have my demon taken away was a rejection of you in some way. It wasn't. It's not gone forever, either," he said. He looked out at the lake, watching the reflection of the cl ouds in the water. He inhaled deeply, then continued. "I have always been the serious one. Abways responsible. I've always made sure everyone is taken care of. It's just how I am. My mother used to worry about me when I was younger. She was worried I would eventually decide that I'd missed out on my childhood because I never was a normal kid. I never got into the normal troublesome situations that kids do when they're young. I took school seriously, I took the military seriously, I took my marriage seriously. This decision wasn't any different, with one exception." He looked over at me. I could see him struggling to keep it together long enough to finish his thought. "This time, I chose me. I don't want anymore responsibility. What I have already is plenty. I'm not ready to be able to take on thoughts and feelings of everyone else too. I just went about it in the most as shole way possible and for that, I'm very sorry."

I scooted over closer to him, not only because I was slightly cold sitting there, but so I could lean against him. "I know you've struggled with everything extra that's been happening for a while. It was always your choice as to what would happen. I respect that. Everyone else respects that, as well. The biggest issue is we know you're not comfortable around us. It's like a constant reminder for the rest of us that you chose a different path. I don't care that you did. You did what was right for you and I respect the choice you made. I just want you to feel comfortable around us again. I can barely contain my emotions on a good day, which means I can barely contain when my eyes change. Now you have to look at Ivan and Adrik too. I don't want to be the reason you're having PTSD flashbacks because I can't keep it together. I've already condemned the rest of them to always having to endure whatever it is I feel at any given time. I don't want you to feel uncomfortable around me, or any of us, as well."

"You haven't condemned anyone, Sephie. They love that they're so connected to you. Seriously. They talk about it all the time," he said, smiling Sweetly at me. "And honestly, what you did last night at the fundraiser for that girl made me realize what a complete as shole I've been this whole time. I was so focused on the demon that I forgot you're still you. You're so incredibly good that you even convinced a demon to help you be even better." He paused, looking at me very seriously. "That's exactly the reason why I'm not ready yet. I still focus on the bad too much. There was too much of a chance that my demon would've won."

"You're still incredibly reasonable, for the record. I think that's a very mature decision to make. I can tell you that I don't think it would've happened, but I also don't live in your head. I support your decision. I always have. It will happen when you're ready. Or maybe not at all. It's always going to be your choice. In every lifetime," I said. "And as for the girl last night, I know what she's going through. She just needs someone to believe her. You guys were that for me. Maybe Ilya can help her with that, too."

He put his arm around my shoulders, pulling me closer and kissing the top of my head. "You do so much for everyone else without a second thought. I'm so sorry I doubted you."

"You had your reasons. I just want you to feel comfortable again. For your sake, just as much as ours. Did Kostya fix you again?" I asked.

"He did. What Stephen did helped tremendously. I was going to ask him to do it again, actually. As much as I didn't want it to happen the first time, I do recognize how helpful it was. I don't think it got everything the first time, though. You were right, too. I was choosing pain over all of you. I see that now," he said, squeezing my shoulders.

"You've been carrying it around for so long that it's become a part of you. It can be scary to let it go. We all knew you weren't really mad, for the record. You were scared. It's okay to be scared, but I want you to try and remember that you don't have to face it alone. We're all here for you and we

all love you."

He didn't say anything, he just held me a little tighter, leaning his head on mine. I heard his breath catch a few times and I knew he was trying to hold back the tears. Even with as irritated with him as I'd been, I still wanted things to go back to normal between all of us. I could learn to deal with him not being as connected as the rest of the guys, as long as we could find ways to make him feel more comfortable around all of us. We needed each

other.

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Sephle

Viktor and I talked for a little longer, but I eventually started to shiver so we decided to head back to the house. We'd been gone for a few hours anyway. He stood up, helping me do the same. He turned around and stood in front of me. "Get on, princess. Can't have you walking back to the house on your own, now can we?"

I giggled as I readily hopped on his back. "This is called enabling. I might love you a little more for it, too," I said, hugging his neck a little tighter as he walked us back to the house.

I had to admit that I felt much better after our talk. He assured me that he was feeling more comfortable around everyone already. He promised me that he would ask Stephen to help him again while we were at the house, so he didn't have to worry about so much.

"You know there's a chance that it won't be just me, Adrik, and Ivan for much longer, right?" I said as we got closer to the house.

"I know. That's partly why I want to ask Stephen to help me now. Everything seems to be speeding up. It wouldn't surprise me if Misha, Andrei and Stephen figured out how to do it soon, too. Some part of me is happy to see it. The more we find out about Ricardo, the worse it seems. Same for Martin. There's still that part of me that's scared of it, though. I know I shouldn't be, but I'm still struggling to not focus on the demons."

J

"You realize this is the same thing that Ivan went through when he had to go to a hospital, right? He could never see you when you were trying to help him just like you couldn't see us when we were trying to help you." Viktor stopped walking. I had to hold on a little tighter, even. I thought he was going to drop me as his hands fell to his sides. I couldn't help the laugh that escaped. "That irritation that you used to feel with Ivan in that situation is the same way we've all felt lately."

He craned his neck around to try and look at me. "I never would've put that together. I owe him another apology, it seems."

"Eh, I think they all understand. You show your love by making sure people you care about are taken care of. Same as me. The fact that Ivan couldn't see you in that situation made you feel somewhat rejected. Same as me. The fact that you couldn't see past my demon made me feel rejected. The fact that you had yours removed made my demon feel rejected. I was doubly irritated," I said, laughing.

"That makes so much more sense. I was never really sure why you were so irritated with me. I just knew I was an as shole and that wasn't helping."

Viktor said.

"I would've told you sooner, but somebody has been avoiding me for quite some time." I said, tightening my grip around his neck.

He laughed, apologizing yet again as we walked toward the back door.

"Don't worry. I forgive you," I said. "As long as we're good again."

"We're good again, sestrichka. Promise," he said. The back room was empty when we walked in. He stopped to put me down.

"Good," I said. Ivan walked in on his way to the kitchen.

"Princess, your goddamn prince will be happy you're back. He's cranky when he has to be away from you for very long," he said, grinning at me.

"That was my fault, Viktor said, apologetically.

"It was no one's fault. We're very needy lately." I said, unable to hide the fact that I missed him just as much as he did me. "Is he upstairs?" I asked.

"Yeah, he just got done in the gym. He decided to take it out on a punching bag instead of sitting around and waiting on you two to get back." Ivan

said.

My eyes went wide in surprise. "Cranky indeed," I said, walking quickly toward the back stairs. "Viktor now knows how we've been feeling. I found a way to tell him so he'd understand. He's likely going to apologize. Be nice," I said to Ivan, laughing as I ran up the stairs.

I could hear the shower running as I walked into the bedroom. I quickly got undressed, hoping to make it into the bathroom before he turned the

water off. He turned to the door just as I walked in, his wide smile across his face as his eyes landed on mine. I practically ran into the shower, jumping into his arms.

"I missed you," he said, pressing his lips to mine.

"So I heard. You're cranky?" I asked, leaning back far enough that I could see him, but not wanting any unnecessary space between us.

He chuckled. "You must've seen Ivan."

I nodded. "He told me you were cranky from having to be away from me," I said, somewhat concerned that he was unhappy with me for being gone

too long.

"He's not wrong. He might've overexaggerated. You needed time with Viktor. But I did miss you," he said, leaning down to kiss me once more.

I looked at him, searching his eyes for a moment. A small grin spread across my face as I found the answer to my question. "It's not you that's cranky. Your demon is still mad at Viktor. It got worse when we stayed gone so long."

He chuckled. "That seems accurate. I started out fine, but as the hours passed and you still weren't back, Ivan finally forced me to go to the gym."

I stood on my toes, pressing my body to his as I kissed him again. This time, with more passion. He wrapped his arms tightly around me, answering my passion with more of his own. It was him that needed air this time, as he broke the kiss. I leaned my head against his chest, enjoying being in his

arms and warm once more.

"How did it go?"

"I think it'll be fine. I found a way to explain everything so he'd understand. He opened up about why he made the decision he did. I told him it was never about the decision and that we supported him no matter what."

"How did you explain it?"

"I told him it was exactly like how he felt when Ivan couldn't see him anytime he was in the hospital before I came along. Viktor used to get so irritated that Ivan couldn't see him, but that's exactly what he was doing. He couldn't see any of us because of our demons. He said seeing what happened last night at the fundraiser with that girl in the kitchen helped him realize just how much of an as shole he'd been," I said. I looked up to see Adrik's expression as I explained everything to him. His sly smile turned up one side of his mo uth.

"I wouldn't have thought of that, but you're absolutely right. The bigger question is how comfortable does he feel around us now?"

"That's getting better. He said he was going to ask Stephen to help him again. He recognizes how much it helped the first time. I asked him if Kostya had fixed him again and he said he was going to ask Stephen to help him again. He's trying. That's all we can ask of him," I said.

"Maybe Stephen should help him while we're still here. That way he doesn't have anything extra to worry about and he can focus more on letting things go," he said, his hands gently running up and down my back

"I said the same thing. I think he'll ask him. I think he was going to apologize to Ivan when we got back, too. I know you guys want to make him suffer a little longer, but I told Ivan to be nice," I said, grinning at him.

He laughed. "Ivan said that very thing when you guys left earlier. I can't say I disagreed with him, either."

"I know. I also know it's more your demons feeling that way than you two. It's understandable, but Viktor told me he didn't feel like he was ready to be able to handle his demon. He said there was still too much of a chance that the demon would've won. He said he has a tendency to focus too much on the negative, so it worried him. Honestly, I can't argue with his logic. He made the decision that he felt was right for him and I agree with him. He knows himself better than any of us do," I sighed. "It was not an easy decision for him to make, but ultimately, I think he chose wisely for where he's at in this lifetime."

Adrik was quiet for a few minutes. "What happens to his demon though?"

"That, I don't know. He made the comment that it wasn't gone for good. I'm not sure what that means. I didn't ask for specifics about that. I didn't want to steer the conversation in that direction," I said quietly.

He kissed my forehead. "Yours is still sad about all this. I can feel your sadness, but it's not all yours. I can tell the difference now."

"How?"

King of the Underworld

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Adrik

“It feels different,” I said, trying to think of how to describe it. “There’s always warmth to everything I feel from you, which is why it was so easy to pick up on it when it was Viktor’s sadness. It’s like the warmth you feel when you think about how much you love me. That warmth comes with everything else. But when it’s your demon, it’s like a red hot fire feeling to it. It’s feisty. It’s like a f**k you element to whatever it is you’re feeling. It’s both intimidating and adorable at the same time,” I said, getting lost watching her eyes change from amber to green.

“From now on, whenever they accuse me of being extra spicy, I’m just going to tell them it’s my demon and I have no control over it,” she said, grinning at me.

God, I love her.

Stephen and Viktor were gone when we came back downstairs, but the Wonder Twins were in the back room with Ivan. They were trying to decide on what movie to watch. Sephie had asked me to make her some coffee before we came downstairs. She was still trying to get warm from being outside in the cold for so long. She ran to Andrei while she waited for me to make the coffee.

“Bubba, I don’t understand how you’re totally fine in just a t-shirt right now, but please share that with me,” she said, curling up next to him on the couch as he threw his massive arm around her to try and help warm her up. He did enjoy having something special with her; his wide smile stretched

across his face as she settled in next to him.

“Wanna experiment?” Ivan asked me.

What did you have in mind?”

“Seeing if we can make her warm again. She did say she’d never turn down a heat boost from us,” he said, laughing.

“Deal,” I said. I could feel Ivan’s anger rising, so I matched his and we both hit her with a wave of anger. I expected her to be surprised by it, but she just giggled. It was Andrei and Misha that were surprised. Andrei, especially. He was immediately worried I was mad she was sitting next to him.

She caught on to what was happening almost instantly, “Don’t worry, Bubba. They’re trying to experiment to see if they can warm me up again. You’re not in trouble,” she said, wrapping his arm around her shoulders tighter. He visibly relaxed.

“I love how extreme levels of anger just make you giggle now, gazelle. It’s enough to cripple anyone else, but you just think it tickles,” Misha said, laughing.

Sephie laughed, her smile brightening the room. “It wasn’t even that high. They both held back,” she said. She looked at Ivan, then me, saying, “it did work though. I feel much warmer now.” She was still smiling, her cheeks now rosy pink.

I made her coffee just the way she liked it and went to sit on one of the couches. Sephie hugged Andrei’s arm saying, “I love you, Bubba, but I gotta go now.” She hopped up and quickly moved beside me, curling up beside me. I had to admit to feeling incredibly happy that she decided to move.

“How long have Viktor and Stephen been gone?” I asked, leaning over to kiss her temple as I pulled her even closer to me. I still felt like I didn’t want to be any farther from her than absolutely necessary. She clearly felt the same as she got up and put herself in my lap, leaning back against me. She wrapped my arms around her, crossing her legs in between mine. I could feel her satisfaction once she’d arranged herself just the way she wanted.

“Only like ten minutes when you guys came back downstairs,” Ivan said.

“Did he say anything to you, Squish?” Sephie asked quietly.

“He did. He said the way you explained everything made him finally understand it from our point of view. It’s one of your best traits, princess. You always know what to say,” Ivan said, winking at Sephie.

I could tell she grinned at him when I saw his face soften. Andrei looked at Sephie, silently asking how she’d explained everything to Viktor. I could see both him and Misha concentrating on what she was telling them, trying to be quiet in case they came back out.

“You’re so smart, gazelle. I never would’ve put that together,” Misha said.

“Don’t underestimate yourself, my adorable Russian guardian. I only thought of it because of something he said to me first. You’re very wise. Don’t think I’ve forgotten that you nailed why our demons were quiet last night,” she said. He grinned at her. “Now, enough talking. Somebody decide on a movie already.”

I laughed quietly, squeezing her a little lighter. I could feel how much lighter she was since her talk with Viktor. It was infectious, Our talk in the shower helped my demon calm down as well. I was much less irritated about the whole situation, which was a huge relief. I could feel the relief from the three guys as well at knowing that Viktor was finally coming around to feeling comfortable with everyone once again.

The movie had barely started and Stephen and Viktor walked back in. It was obvious how much better Viktor looked this time after Stephen helped him. Not just because he was a willing participant this time, either.

They both found places on the couches and settled in with everyone else to enjoy a few hours of being able to completely relax. Halfway through the movie, Sephie moved to stretch out in between me and Ivan. Her head was in my lap, her feet in his. I knew she wasn’t going to stay awake until the end of the movie. It took maybe ten minutes and she was sound asleep in between us.

He glanced at her after she’d fallen asleep, laughing at her. “Guess she’s warm enough again,” he said silently.

“I think your experiment worked. It’s good info to have, given that she gets cold so easily,” I responded. He nodded in agreement, focusing on the movie

once more. ~

I tried to focus on the movie, but I found my mind wandering to everything else. I was anxious to talk to Dario again, worried that I’d missed something the first time. I was also starting to get impatient with the situation with the mayor and the police commissioner. It definitely helped to speak

to the mayor, as well as the DA, last night, but I wanted that situation over with. As much for the people of the city as for me. They deserved to have people in office that were working for them, not against them.

It might’ve been somewhat selfish of me, but I preferred the people of the city to be well taken care of. They left my organization alone that way. When the people were happy, when there was order in the city, everyone thrived. Business owners gave back to the community. People ignored more of the illegal side of things. That side would always be there, whether I was in charge or not. People would always turn to outside means to escape whatever it was they were avoiding facing. I just wanted to make sure it was regulated.

All the dealers in the city had standards, especially those that were working for Trino. His dealers helped bring the standards up for the rest of the city’s dealers. It was a business, after all. The longer you kept your customers alive, the more money you could make off of them. The drugs that Trino would send were pure, meaning less side effects. His dealers would only sell in small amounts, to keep overdoses from becoming too common. Other dealers caught on to how much more money his dealers were making and changed their own rules.

Sometimes, the love of money could be used for the benefit of the people. I knew if Sal and Ricardo were to take over, those rules would go out the window. They didn’t care about the people. One look at Sal’s area of the city would tell you that. His area used to be booming. Now it was all but abandoned. The entire city would turn into that if I didn’t stop them.

Sephie stirred slightly, breaking me free from my thoughts. She didn’t open her eyes, but I heard her voice in my head. “You’re all over the place. What are you thinking about?”

I smiled at her, feeling guilty that I had disturbed her sleep. “Nothing important. You somehow manage to always break me free from my thoughts, even when you’re sleeping.”

She found my hand, lacing her fingers through mine. She still hadn’t opened her eyes. “You have a lot more on your mind than I do at any given point. I don’t want you to be stressed.”

I picked her hand up, kissing the back of it. “I love you, Sephie. More than I ever thought possible.”

She finally opened her eyes, revealing their deepest depth of the ocean blue. She smiled sweetly at me. “I love you, Adrik.”

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 474

King of the Underworld

474

Adrik

I caught myself standing close to Sephie while she worked on making dinner, with Misha's help, just watching everyone relax and enjoy a few moments of peace. Before Sephie, I rarely came to the house. Now, I find myself wanting to come here more and more. It's become a sanctuary for us. A place where everyone could just relax and unplug from everything going on in the city.

Sephie caught me observing, with a small smile on my lips. Her smile stretched across her face, "We should make it a point to come here more often. Even just for a night. We all need it," she said silently.

"I agree. You do have good ideas. Don't listen to what Iwan says about you," I said, trying not to laugh. She didn't fall for it. She knows Ivan just as well as I do. Maybe better, at this point.

I heard her laughing in her head. "7 might've believed that if you picked anyone but Squish. He's a very close second to you in how much he loves me." She glanced at him, sweetly smiling at the memory she was obviously thinking about. "We've come so far from me thinking he wanted to kill me in my sleep the first few days I knew you guys."

I laughed. "He never wanted to kill you, solnishko, "I told her, shaking my head.

"I disagree. I think he totally thought I was the next Vanessa for at least the first day and a half," she responded.

"Would you like to wager?"

"Don't ask stupid questions," she said, cutting her eyes at me while she washed a dish in the sink. She waited for a lull in the conversation between everyone else, then looked at Ivan. "Squish, we need you to settle a dispute."

He chuckled. "What about?" he asked.

She put her hands on her hips, looking at him like this was a very serious matter. "Did you or did you not want to kill me in my sleep for at least the first day and a half that you knew me?

They all laughed. Ivan thought about his answer for a few moments, then said, "okay, so how technical is this dispute? Because I wouldn't have waited until you were sleeping if it came to that," he said, grinning at her. His cheeks were slightly red as he was somewhat worried his answer was going to piss either her or me off.

She crossed her arms across her chest, looking at me triumphantly. "Told you!" she said, matter-of-factly.

"To be fair, it only lasted for that first day and a half. Once you stitched me up in your kitchen, my murderous urges subsided," he said, grinning at her. "And not just because you're handy to have around

I walked toward her, unable to hide my smile. She really did know him better than I did at this point. It did not surprise me in the slightest. She was still proud of herself for winning our little wager as I pulled her to me. "We can discuss what I won later," she said, wrapping her arms around my waist and resting her head against my chest.

"I like where this is going, "I told her.

"What brought this up?" Ivan asked.

Sephie giggled against my chest. "He was being cheeky. He told me I had good ideas and that I shouldn't listen to what you say about me," she said. "I told him I might've believed him if he'd picked anyone but you. Then I thought back to how far we've come," she said, wistfully as she looked at him longingly.

He grinned at her. "I definitely did not make it easy on you, but I'm very glad you're as stubborn as you are."

"I don't know, Squish. I saw how you acted around Tori and Vanessa both. I think you actually did make it easy on me," Sephie said, turning around so she could see him, but still leaning back against me. She took both of my arms and pulled them across her stomach as she talked to Ivan.

"She's not wrong there," Misha said. "There was literally only one time you tried to intimidate her and even that was half-assed compared to what you normally do."

"When was this?" I asked.

"The first night we watched her. She had fallen asleep on the couch, so she didn't know that me and Ivan switched places with Viktor and Andrei. She was expecting them when she woke up, so she made a sarcastic comment before the saw us. She was scared of both of us initially, but then more sarcasm came out of her mouth. Ivan tried to intimidate her because she made a joke about Viktor being on meth. She was scared, but the sarcasm didn't stop. I saw him trying to hide his smile when he left the apartment," Misha said, laughing at Ivan.

"See? You totally took it easy on me. Clearly, my soul wasn't the only one that recognized this relationship," she said.

"Maybe a little." Ivan said.

Sephie pulled my arms around her tighter. "Not as quick as this one, but you were a fairly close second," she said. I could hear the smile in her voice, as well as feel her joy at this conversation.

We ended up talking and laughing through dinner, then for a few hours after dinner. It was nice to talk about other things. We made bets on whether Ilya would call Jessica and how that potential relationship would work out. We also made bets on whether Vitaliy would try to recruit Viktor's other brother at some point, given that he was so happy with Ilya.

"How is Trino coming with finding a new security team?" Sephie asked.

Viktor chuckled. "He wanted to do it himself, so it's going quite slowly. He's trying to recruit from his dealers, but none of them have adequate training. That's not going to end well."

"Is he seeing the error of his ways yet?" she asked.

"Maybe. Chen said he had heard that Trino was thinking about coming back to me for help since he was struggling. He's kept Gus and Oscar with him the whole time he's been in the city. Everything's been quiet enough that I haven't worried too much, but now with the possibility of Niko and Vito coming back, he needs a security team. A real security team," Viktor said.

"What about Chris and Keith?" she asked, looking between Viktor and Ivan.

"I talked to both of them about it already. They're interested. They both speak enough Spanish that they could get by to begin with. But then Trino told me he wanted to find his own people, so that was the end of that," Viktor said, still amused by the situation.

Sephie frowned, trying to think of a solution. Misha had been working on being more subtle when he tried to find outcomes, so no one noticed him searching for the solution. "It's okay, gazelle. He's going to come back to Viktor, like Chen said. He'll take Chris and Keith, too. Chris is going to move his mom to Colombia, even. Once everything is settled, of course. That movie got fast-forwarded quite a bit, apparently," he said.

"Well, at least we know things will eventually settle," she said, smiling at him.

"There is the larger question of how much we tell him about everything going on," Ivan said.

I groaned quietly. "I've been thinking about this as well. As much as I don't really want to tell him everything, I think we need to tell him everything. His new guys too. We need to vet them before he hires them. Chris and Keith included. They don't know even a fraction of what's been happening."

Sephie looked to Misha, silently asking him to confirm what I'd just said. Misha nodded, rubbing his arms after he'd checked. He grinned when he looked at her, then pointed to me. She turned to look at me, her purple eyes telling me everything I needed to know.

King of the Linderworld

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Adrik

Once we finally made it upstairs, I was exhausted. I didn't even need to tell Sephie I was exhausted. She felt it. She didn't waste the opportunity to tease me about it, though.

"You definitely got new level zapped. Fighting it never ends well, either. I know this from experience," she said, her sweet smile across her face. She walked back to me, unbuttoning my shirt for me.

"Is this from being able to feel all of them the same way you do? That doesn't seem like it should've zapped me," I said as I watched her undressing

She chewed on her lip, her mind trying to come up with solutions, "I don't know. Maybe there's more and we just don't know it yet?"

I put my hands on either side of her face, gently pulling her to me. I kissed her softly, wanting so much more, but I had zero energy. She smiled against my lips as she pushed my jeans off my hips. She pulled back, pointing to the bed. "Go to bed," she said sternly.

I gladly climbed into bed, waiting for her to turn off the lights. She climbed in next to me, after stealing my shirt to wear. She laid across my chest in her favorite spot. I might've lasted 30 seconds before I was out completely.

I found myself completely awake in my own darkness. Haven't been here in years. I rarely remembered my dreams, if I even had them. I assumed I had them, but because I never remembered them, I couldn't be totally sure. I looked around, trying to see if I could see anything, other than my own body. I could still feel Sephie, just as strongly as I always did. I knew she was still happily sleeping on my chest.

Gradually, the darkness gave way to a path ahead of me that led to a small house. I'd never seen the house before, but I decided to explore anyway. When I opened the front door, I could hear someone playing the piano. I recognized the song as one of Sephie's songs she regularly played.

I walked further into the house, trying to be quiet so as not to disturb whoever it was playing the piano. After a short hallway, there was a large room where I saw a man playing the piano. I looked around the room, trying to find clues as to who he was or why he'd be in my dreams. I also wanted to know why he'd be playing one of Sephie's songs. I was so busy looking around, I didn't notice when the song ended.

"I can play her song because I'm the one that gave her the melody," he said, as he stood up from the piano. He turned to face me, a pleasant expression on his face. There was something familiar about him, but I didn't feel like I'd ever seen him before. He watched me, watching him for a few moments. Finally, a smile stretched across his face. That's when I knew,

"You're Sephie's father," I said. He nodded. "She has your smile."

"That might be all she has from me, but I find it's one of my favorite things about her," he said.

"Mine too."

He chuckled. "We had extra angels on standby when you two first met because your heart threatened to stop every time you saw her smile. Did she ever tell you?"

I laughed. "No, not about the extra angels. She did tell me she knew my heart threatened to stop each time."

"She found out that little detail early on in your journey. She was still worried you would think she was bonkers if she revealed too much. I don't know why she would think that about you. You've handled everything like a champ. Better than anyone expected. Seriously. You cost quite a few of us a substantial bit of money in the beginning when you didn't freak out about things we were sure you were going to freak out about," he said.

I couldn't help but laugh again. "Clearly her smile is not all she has from you."

He grinned. "I can't really take credit for her love of the wager. She discovered it well after I was gone. But it does seem to run in the family." He paused for a moment, contemplating how to proceed. I knew if he'd brought me here, there was something important he needed to say.

I decided to go first. "I have to thank you for all the times you've helped us. You've proven to be a very valuable resource for us through all of this and

I'm very happy that Sephie has you."

"You're not the only one that's grateful. It's because of you that she has the right people around her now. I owe you thanks for that, too. Between you and Ivan, I really have nothing to worry about. I mean, I still do. Fathers gotta lather, you know. But you two will always make sure she's protected and safe. The others too, but you and Ivan have very special roles in her life," he said.

"Is there something new happening to me? Is that why I'm so tired right now?" I asked.

He inhaled deeply. "You've felt your connection get stronger with everyone lately, but especially with Sephie?" I nodded. "And you've also felt your demon getting restless, so to speak? Especially when Sephie was gone with Viktor earlier?" I nodded again. "Your demon is growing stronger, which means you're growing stronger. You've demonstrated you have complete control of it." He paused again, looking at me like he was somewhat nervous

to tell me the rest.

"Why does that make you nervous?"

"Much like Viktor, I want no part of Hell. My wings are white as snow for a reason. It's an unavoidable side effect of getting news delivered this way. Not to worry, I can manage," he said, giving me a weak smile. "Adrik, when Stephen joked about his gift leveling up, he was really telling you what you'd be able to do."

"Ripping the demon out and crushing it?" I asked, completely surprised.

"Well, not crushing it. But because your particular demon is as powerful as it is and because you are who you are, you now have the ability to condemn souls, both human and demon straight to Hell. You can take both from a body and send them to Hell."

"What happens to the soul then?"

"It spends eternity in Hell. You're the only one that can grant it reprieve once you condemn them."

"That doesn't sound like something I'm going to use very often," I said.

He smiled at me, his shoulders visibly relaxing. "This is exactly why you were granted the power."

"What do you mean?"

"Your new gift is not something to be taken lightly and it's only meant to be used in very extreme cases. Namely, Ricardo and Martin. Those two have made such powerful deals with their demons that Stephen's gift would be completely ineffective on them. He could break them, but the soul is eternally bound to that demon. Even after coming back, it's going to be forced to live out the same life over and over. You're what can break that cycle. Send the demon back to Hell, along with their souls and those souls never get the chance to come back."

"There's no chance at redemption for them?" I asked, suddenly not sure I wanted the responsibility of condemning someone's soul to an eternity of

suffering.

"It's a heavy decision, Adrik. You're right to be wary of it. You have to remember that both souls made their own choices. They knew the consequences. They might not have known the full extent of those consequences, but they knew there would be consequences nonetheless. You are what will keep future generations safe from those two demons. Think of it that way. It's easier to digest."

I was quiet for a few moments, thinking about what he'd just told me. "How will this affect Sephie?"

"Yes!" he said quietly. He quickly looked back at me, trying to look serious once again. "Sorry. I knew you would ask that," he said, grinning at me. "Because you and she are so connected, your strength will also become her strength. However, you're the only one that can condemn souls and deliver them to Hell. But she's going to see an increase in her power just as you will. Her demon will also grow stronger. Ivan will get a boost from her, but not as much as what she'll get from you. The other three will become connected to their demons quickly, once you realize your full power. They've already drawn considerable power from both you and Sephie. You're what unlocked Stephen's extra gifts. That's when it became apparent you could handle this responsibility. Nobody expected you to go full nuclear and then just turn it off like a switch that quickly. Especially not when it came to

Armando."

"I have Sephie to thank for that. She showed me how to control it," I said.

His smile lit up his face, much in the same way that Sephie's would light up a room. It was evident that he was proud of her.

"What about Viktor? How is he going to handle all of us being so connected to our demons?"

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Adrik

“Yes! I’m on fire!” he said quietly again, making me laugh. I was happy to make him some money, or whatever they were betting with, while we talked. “Viktor will come around. You’ll see. Kostya talks to him nightly. This last time that Stephen helped him worked much better than the first time. He’s going to need it one more time, but then he should be good. Sephie helped him understand how his actions have come across to everyone else. He feels much better about everything, which means he’ll be much more comfortable around everyone very soon.”

“What happened to his demon?” I asked, curious,

He sighed. “He doesn’t know this, so let’s keep this between us, shall we?” I nodded in agreement. “When he asked for it to be taken away, the only choices that Kostya had were to send it back to H ell, where it may or may not ever get the chance to escape again. Or it could go to a sort of purgatory, if you will. Purgatory in the traditional, religious sense, isn’t a real place, but there is a sort of in between Earth and H ell. Kostya sent Viktor’s demon there. If Viktor ever reaches the point that he’s ready to join the rest of you, then it’ll be your jobs to fetch his demon from that

purgatory.”

“It has to be that demon? Are demons like assigned to people?”

“Yes and no. For Viktor, it has to be that demon. You guys aren’t dealing with just any demons. There’s a hierarchy of demons. Every single one of you has a very old, very powerful demon with you. It had to be so. You’ve had the same demon over many lifetimes. This is the one that finally saw you each taming the demon. There have been other lifetimes where that was not necessarily the case for all of you. It had to be all of you.”

“If it had to be all of us, then how is it still working without Viktor’s demon?”

“Kostya. He’s a new addition to this lifetime. He’s so grateful to Viktor for helping him to clear his Karma that he’s filling the gap left by the absence

of Viktor’s demon.“

I suddenly felt worried about Viktor’s demon. “Is it safe wherever it is? Can it be harmed?”

“Because it’s so powerful, it can take care of itself. It’s not a cake walk where it is, but Kostya keeps an eye on it. Viktor is fearful that he could tame the demon, which is why he asked for it to be taken away. Kostya is trying to help him have the confidence to be able to handle it, but it might not happen in this lifetime. His demon isn’t in so much danger that it can’t last a while. We help out when we can, but it’s really quite scrappy. It’s doing

fine. So far.”

I still couldn’t help but worry about it, which sounded very strange to say. He chuckled at me. “Again, this is why you’ve been granted this power, Adrik. All this time, you’ve been worried that Sephie would love you less because of your demon. You’ve completely missed the part where your light is so strong that even your demon prefers to leave the shadows now. You’re worried for the safety of a demon just to be clear what we’re talking about here.” He looked at me thoughtfully for a moment, then asked, “you’re all feeling the same way about your demons that you feel about each other

now, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I am. I know Sephie is for sure, too. I’m almost positive Ivan is as well. I can feel the difference between Sephie’s demon and her now. Her demon got mad at me the other day too. It was like she was doubly mad at me.”

He laughed. “I don’t envy you in that situation. Even as a child, she had an impressive temper. We rarely saw it, but she moved the Heavens when it

appeared.”

“That sounds right,” I said, smiling at the thought of tiny Sephie throwing a tantrum.

“The three of you are a shining example of the subtleties of good and evil. You can use good for evil and you can use evil for good. At the end of the day, it’s about the choices you make and what you choose to give your energy to. You’ve all seen unspeakable horrors in your short lives, but the darker your shadow, the brighter your light. You can’t have one without the other. You three, and eventually six, are the balance between good and evil.” He took a step closer to me, placing his hand on my shoulder. “In order for this to work, I’m going to have to zap you, so to speak. You’re going to worry Sephie because you’re not going to wake up for a few more hours. She’s already been trying to wake you for half an hour or so. She can feel that you’re happy, so she’s not fr eaking out. But she will when this happens because she’s going to see it. I can get word to Kostya and Viktor will tell her that everything will be fine.”

I looked at him, somewhat worried. He laughed. “Don’t worry. It won’t hurt,” he said. As soon as he got the words out, all I could see was blinding light around me. I could still feel his hand on my shoulder, but I couldn’t see him. I couldn’t see the room we were in. I couldn’t see the piano.

King of the Underworld

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Sephie

I woke up before Adrik the next morning. We had planned on getting up and working out this morning, so I was somewhat surprised that he didn't wake up when I started to stir. Even the few times he'd wanted to stay in bed longer, he was always awake for at least a few minutes once he felt me stir. Guess he really did get new level zapped.

I decided to let him sleep a little longer, thinking he definitely needed it. I laid my head back on his chest, lazily tracing random patterns across his chest and stomach. I could feel him like normal; he felt quite happy. There was a moment or two of worry, but it was short-lived.

I started to worry when 1 felt his emotions start to increase. I suddenly felt massive waves of every emotion hit me, one right after the other. I sat up to look at him. When I did, he looked like Viktor was touching him. He was completely lit up. I could clearly see his aura, like I was looking through Andrei's eyes. It was plain as day. It was so bright, it illuminated the entire room, forcing me to shield my eyes from the brightness.

I reached out and timidly put my hand on him, trying to wake him. I wasn't sure what was happening, but something was definitely happening. He started to return to normal, the light around him fading gradually. He still wasn't responding to me trying to wake him up. Not even in the slightest. I tried talking out loud to him. I tried talking telepathically to him. I tried to look inside his head, but I could see nothing. I could still feel him. He still

felt happy, at least.

"Princess? Everything okay?"I heard Ivan ask. He must've felt everything that just happened through me.

"I don't know. Can you come up here?"

"Be right there," he responded.

He walked into the room not a minute later, a worried look on his face. "I can't get him to wake up. Did you feel what just happened?" I asked.

"Yeah, it felt like you were all over the place. It's why I checked on you."

"That wasn't me. That was him."

"That's never happened before," he said.

"He also lit up like Viktor and Kostya were fixing him. Only brighter. It lit up the entire room. Now I can't get him to respond at all. I can't see anything when I look in his head either. It's just black."

"Can you feel him?"

"Yeah. He still feels happy, at least. He feels like he does when he's sleeping," I said.

Ivan thought for a few minutes. "I bet something happened. Like his mom came to him or Kostya or maybe even your dad. He might still be talking to them, which is why we can't wake him up. The few times you can't be woken up, when you're not hurt, it's been because you were talking to one of

them."

I was still worried, but his explanation made sense. It was just very unlike Adrik to not be able to wake up at all. "Maybe. What if it's not, though? What if something is really wrong? I'd be able to tell, right?"

He laughed. "You'd be able to tell if something was really wrong, princess. You'd be the first to know."

We both heard a soft knock on the bedroom door. "You can come in, Bubba," I said.

Andrei peeked around the door, still unsure he should come all the way in the room. I smiled at him. "It's okay, Bubba. Really. You can come in," 1

said.

"Viktor told me to tell you that Boss is fine. Kostya said he needs a few more hours of sleep and that he'll explain when he wakes up," Andrei said.

"Is Kostya the one that's been talking to him?" Ivan asked.

"I don't know. He didn't say anything else other than Boss was fine and you shouldn't worry," he said, looking at me.

"Easier said than done," I said, chewing on my lip. "Now I understand why it freaks all of you out so much when this happens to me. I don't like it."

"At least he's asleep and not sitting up at the end of the bed with his eyes wide open and going apeshit," Ivan said, grinning at me.

"That's fair. That's totally fair. This is much easier to deal with. I will concede that, 100%," I said.

"Have you tried looking in his head? Is he dreaming?" Andrei asked.

"I tried. All I can see is black," | said.

"But can you feel him? Is that why you freaked out earlier?" he asked.

"That wasn't me. That was him. I can still feel him like normal. I just can't see anything right now. He feels happy, at least. He's just never not responded before," I said.

"That was him?" Andrei asked, surprised.

"Yeah. He lit up like Viktor and Kostya were fixing him, too. But brighter. I'm surprised you guys didn't see it from downstairs. It was so bright."

"Maybe it is Kostya that's talking to him, then?" Andrei said, trying to come up with plausible explanations.

I shrugged my shoulders. "Apparently, he'll explain when he wakes up. I should tell Misha that our run likely isn't going to happen now. I don't want to leave him," I said, putting my hand on Adrik's stomach.

"Maybe he'll torture Stephen anyway. You've successfully passed the torch of torture onto him now," Ivan said.

I laughed. "I'm going to have to apologize to Stephen for that one. Maybe… Nah. I'm not really that sorry."

They both left shortly after, telling me to call them if I needed anything and they would be downstairs if something were to happen. Ivan offered to bring me breakfast, but I told him I was likely going to go back to sleep. I suddenly felt very tired. I was pretty sure it was from Adrik. Whatever had happened to him was zapping him and I could feel it too.

When I woke for the second time, I felt Adrik's fingers lightly running through my hair and over my back. I snuggled into him more, mostly out of habit, before remembering what had happened that morning. I sat up, looking at him to see if he really was awake. His handsome smile stretched across his face, making me forget everything but him.

"I'm sorry I worried you, solnishko. I needed some extra sleep," he said, placing his hand against my cheek.

"What happened? You were glowing at one point, so don't even try to tell me that nothing happened." I said, holding his hand against my face to keep

it there.

He chuckled. "I saw your father," he said. "I did get new level zapped. I literally got zapped this time. I assume that's when you saw the glowing."

"Um, was it a good zap? Are you in trouble zap? Why am I nervous that you were talking to my dad without me there?"

He pulled me on top of him, sitting up more so he could see me better. "Not in trouble. Your dad is a very nice man. You have his smile," he said, his finger running lightly over my cheek and down my neck.

"He is kind of great. What did he tell you?"

"It seems that Stephen called my new level instead of his," he said, smirking at me.

King of the Underworld

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Sephie

“You can crush souls now?” I asked, barely above a whisper. I know my eyes were as wide as they could possibly go.

He laughed. “Not crush them literally, no. But I can condemn them to Hell now.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Don’t worry, it was difficult for me to comprehend as well. Your dad told me that my demon is getting more powerful, which means so am 1. When I helped Stephen break Armando and I went full nuclear but was able to just switch it off, apparently that proved that I could handle more. I’m still in complete control of my demon. There are going to be times when even Stephen will be ineffectual, like with Ricardo and Martin. Their deals really are eternal, apparently. Even if Stephen breaks them, those souls still belong to those two demons. They would come back and still make the same mistakes each time because they’re always going to be tied to their demons. The opposite of us, I guess. Instead of that happening, I break the cycle by sending them all back to Hell.”

“What happens then? They stay there forever?” I asked. I could feel the goosebumps coming up over my entire body. I saw the look on Adrik’s face that meant my eyes had changed. I was guessing purple, but I was too curious about what he was telling me to ask.

“Your dad said I’m the only one that can grant them reprieve once I’ve condemned them to Hell. I’m still not sure what that means,” up to twirl one of my curls around his fingers.

he said, reaching

“It means you really are the King of the Underworld,” I said, watching his reaction. I knew I had goosebumps, but I could actually feel his spreading over his body when I said it. He was completely focused on my eyes, though.

“Sephie, say that again,” he said as he watched my eyes.

I repeated the phrase, then asked, “why? What are they doing?”

“They were purple as I was telling you everything, but when you said I really was the King of the Underworld, they started to change to a new color. It didn’t last very long, but I swear it was red,” he said.

I giggled. “Shut up.”

“No, it’s true. It happened when you said it the second time, too.”

“Stephen is going to be so happy,” I said, hiding my face in his shoulder. I was just happy he was awake and responsive again. I sighed. “I understand why it freaks you out so much when you can’t wake me up now.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, it’s not ideal. I understand why it needs to happen, but I never like it when it happens. How much did you get rapped when I got

zapped?”

“I don’t know. I called Ivan up here when it first happened. The glowing part kind of freaked me out. I could also feel your emotions, one by one, incredibly strongly. They all did too, Ivan thought it was me, so he checked on me and that’s when I asked him to come up here because I still couldn’t get you to respond. I tried looking in your head, but all I saw was black. It worried me.”

He wrapped his arms around me, holding me tightly. “I’m sorry I worried you. Your dad said you’d be able to see whatever it was he did to me.”

“It was like Viktor was touching you. But a thousand times brighter. It lit up the entire room. That was after your emotions went crazy. Ivan said you likely were talking to someone. We thought your mom or Kostya. Then Bubba came upstairs and said Kostya had told Viktor you were fine. They offered to bring me breakfast, but I was suddenly really tired, so I just went back to sleep with you.”

His hands were roaming lightly over my body as we talked. “I’m glad you got extra sleep. You’re going to get benefit from this too. Your dad said because we’re so connected, your demon is going to grow stronger with mine. Ivan will get a boost through you, but you’ll get the most. The other three are also going to become connected to their demons very quickly,” he said. He felt me stiffen as I worried about Viktor. “Don’t worry, I asked about Viktor. He’ll be able to handle it. He needs Stephen to help him one more time and then he’ll be good.”

I let out the breath I was holding, making him laugh softly. I was quiet, thinking about everything he’d just told me. “I think we should stay one more night, then. Dario can wait until tomorrow, I think. We can ask Misha to be sure, but I think staying here another night is best,” I said.

“I will not argue with you on that one. I wouldn’t mind another night here either. If we go back, I’m going to feel the need to go to my office and 1 don’t want to just yet. I do, however, want to send someone for Vinny’s. I’m starving,” he said as he flipped me onto my back. I could hear his stomach grumbling as he did it.

“It’s like you love me or something.” I said, laughing.

He was smiling at me, but he stopped to think about something and his face turned serious for a moment. “I do love you. I always have. But as it turns out, my demon loves you as well,” he said, unable to stop the sly grin that was appearing on his face.

“Shut up.”

“No, he does. He very much does. I’ve never felt anything so clearly from him before.”

I laughed. “As it turns out, I love him too.” I could feel the happiness exuding from him when I said that, which made me laugh louder, “I just made him extra happy, didn’t 17”

“Yeah, like 12 year old boy who just saw a boob for the first time happy,” he said as he sat up to pull me up. I pulled my shirt up, flashing him my boobs, just for fun.

“So much happiness he’s not going to be able to take it!” I said, laughing

He stood up, pulling me off the bed with him. His handsome smile was stretched across his face as we laughed together. “I love hearing your laugh. He does too. You’re much lighter lately. It’s infectious.

“I could say the same for you, you know. I think as everything gets even weirder, you, me, and Ivan have become anchors for the other three. There’s a quiet calm to you now, where before you always felt like your anger was always present just under the surface, threatening to burn anything in your way. That’s still there, but it’s quieter and more in control. It’s scarier, if I’m being honest,” I said.

He stopped walking to the closet and turned back toward me, surprise on his face. “It scares you?” he asked. The surprise on his face was quickly replaced with concern.

I put my hand on his cheek, loving his constant concern for me. “No, love. I don’t think it’s possible for you to scare me. I meant it’s scarier for anyone else outside of our little weird family. You make people nervous on a good day, but it’s to a new level now. Even Neal has noticed it. He’s tried to hide it, but he has to constantly remind himself that he hasn’t done anything to incur your wrath every time he talks to you now.”

He was thoughtful for a minute. “I don’t even feel bad about that.”

I laughed loudly. “You shouldn’t. You don’t need to change a thing, either. People aren’t necessarily scared of you; they’re scared you can see something in them that they don't want you to see. Even without knowing what’s happening, you’ve learned to shine your light on their darkest places. People don’t like that.”

“I learned it from watching you,” he said, leaning down and pressing his lips to mine. I reached up and pulled him closer to me.

How is it possible to love this man so much?

King of the Underworld

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Adrik

I caught Sephie observing me as we got dressed to go downstairs. I could tell she was noticing new things, but she wasn't sharing yet. Or the was talking to one of the guys and keeping me out of the conversation. It could go either way.

“Are you talking to someone else?” I asked before we left the bedroom.

She giggled. “No. You were right. I’m watching you. You feel different.”

“Different how?” I stopped her from leaving so I could hear her answer first before we shared everything with the guys.

She inhaled, thinking of how to word it. “Before, you were always hot. Like me. Even more so than me, I think. It’s one of my favorite things about you, if I’m being honest. Now, you feel hot and cold…”

“At the same time?” 1 finished for her. She grinned at me.

“You can feel it too?”

“I did when your dad zapped me. Normally, my anger is always present. It’s always hot, to varying degrees, like you said. But when your dad zapped me, everything got turned up. My fire was a raging inferno, but it felt cold at the same time. But the kind of cold that will burn you,” I said.

She chewed on her bottom lip, her eyebrows scrunched as she thought about what she was feeling and what I’d just said. She looked up at me, eyes changing to purple as I watched. “You’re the balance between good and evil now.”

“Did you look in my head for that answer?” I asked.

She looked confused. “No. It just popped in my head. Were you thinking it just now?”

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“No, but that’s what your dad said to me. You, me, and Ivan. Eventually the Wonder Twins and Stephen, too. We’re all the balance between good and

evil.”

“Side note, we need to come up with a new nickname for the three of them. It feels awkward to always say ‘and Stephen,” she said, grinning at me.

I pulled her to me forcefully, making her squeal. “I just love you,” I said, laughing along with her as I gave her a quick kiss. I went to open the bedroom door and she used the opportunity to jump on my back to hitch a ride downstairs. Honestly, I couldn’t think of anything I would’ve loved

more in that moment.

Ivan was the first one we saw when we came downstairs. He was in the kitchen, looking for something for lunch. “Have somebody get Vinny’s for everyone, if you guys haven’t eaten,” I said. “I’m starving.”

“On it,” Ivan said, pulling out his phone. He typed a quick message, then put his phone back in his pocket. “It’ll be her shortly,” he said. “Do I have to wait until the food arrives to hear what happened to you?”

Sephie giggled and hugged me tighter. “I think you should make him wait,” she said.

“Why do you hate me now, princess?” he said, clutching his heart.

“You didn’t let me finish! I think he should make you wait until the rest of the guys are here,” she said, innocently. He looked at her skeptically, knowing full well that is not what she meant when she first said it, which made her laugh again. “You love me, Squish. Don’t even try to lie.”

I deposited her on the counter, grabbing a glass from one of the cabinets. I filled it with water, drank half, then handed the rest to her. She finished it, handing me the empty glass along with her sweet smile.

Ivan was watching our exchange with a devious grin on his face. “You two are extra disgusting right now. And by disgusting, I mean f**king adorable.”

Sephie looked at me, trying to be serious. “Squish feels left out!” she announced. She opened her arms toward him, but did not make a move to leave her spot on the counter. “Come here, Squish. Bring it in. Come on. You know you want to,” she said, trying so hard to not laugh, but failing miserably at it. Her laughter is what brought the rest of the guys to the kitchen.

Ivan heard them coming and walked to Sephie quickly, wrapping his substantial arms around her. “Gotta get in here before everyone else shows up.” he said, laughing along with her.

“You’re my favorite,” she said in a very loud whisper as everyone else walked in the kitchen. She knew she would cause objections from everyone else. She might’ve enjoyed that part.

“Why is it that Boss is the one that got zapped and likely has a new level unlocked, but you look like it was you?” Misha asked, looking at Sephie clowning with Ivan when they walked in.

“It’s new level by osmosis. It’s this new thing we’re trying out. I don’t know how it’s going to work with the red pandas though. Pancakes and water don’t mix,” she said.

“I thought you said you hated school and never paid attention?” Stephen asked in his usual thoughtful way. “You have impressive range.”

She laughed. “I said I hated school and never paid attention. I didn’t say I wasn’t still a straight A student.

“Touché,” Misha said as he walked to the fridge to look for something to eat.

“Don’t bother, my adorable Russian guardian. Vinny’s is on the way,” she told him,

“I love you so much right now,” Misha said.

“Don’t love me. Love him. It was his idea,” she said, pointing to me.

Misha turned to look at me, then very seriously said, “I love you so much right now.”

“Awww. See Ivan? We’re not the only ones that are disgusting right now. It’s spreading.” she said.

“Gross,” Ivan said, smiling at her. “Now that everyone is here, I want to know what happened.”

“You’re very impatient,” she said, still enjoying teasing him. She looked at him for a minute, much the same way she was looking at me earlier before we came downstairs. She grinned at him. “It’s not you that’s impatient right now. Your demon is all itchy.”

He looked at her, clearly surprised. “Is that what this is?” He looked at me, saying, “now I understand why you needed to go to the gym yesterday.”

I looked at Ivan, noticing what Sephie was seeing. “Yeah, she’s right. I think your demon might already know what happened. It’s excited.”

“You can see it now too?” Andrei asked.

“Not in the way you might think. I can tell the difference between Sephie and her demon. It’s becoming clearer for Ivan now too. It’s very clear with mine. He apparently has his own thoughts and feelings,” I said, unable to hide my smile as I looked at Sephie. She giggled as I walked to her, standing in between her legs while still facing everyone else. She slid her arms and legs around me, resting her chin on my shoulder.

“Have you had a conversation with it yet?” Misha asked, curious,

“No. I don’t know if that will happen or not, but I can feel what he feels now, I don’t know if it’s the same for him or not,” | said.

“Is this the new level?” Stephen asked.

I could feel Sephie shaking her head no. “Nope. You are especially going to love the new level, Yoden. But don’t be jealous. I’m still impressed you gave us the clue first. That’s normally my job,” she said.

Stephen’s mind was racing, trying to piece together what she’d just told him. His eyes went wide once he landed on the answer. “Seriously?” he asked,

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completely astonished.

“Well, no. Not exactly like you said. No crushing is involved,” I said, trying to see if everyone else could figure it out as well.

“Disappointing.” Stephen said.

“Okay, you’re going to have to enlighten the rest of us because we have no clue what you’re talking about,” Misha said.

“I can remove souls and demons and condemn them to Hell,” I said, matter-of-factly.

“No longer disappointing.” Stephen said quietly, a look of awe on his face.

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King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 480

King of the Underworld

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Adrik

“You can do what now?” Ivan asked, completely dumbfounded.

“There will be times when even Stephen will be ineffectual. Like with Ricardo and Martin. The two of them made deals that are eternal, meaning even if Stephen breaks them in this lifetime, their souls will still belong to the demons in the next lifetime. I’m what will break that cycle,” I said. Sephie tightened her hold on me.

“Everybody gather round for what I’m about to say, because apparently my eyes are choosing a new color but it’s fleeting right now,” she said. They all looked at her like she was playing a joke on them.

“No, she’s really serious. It’s happened twice, but they don’t stay like that for very long.” I said.

They all moved closer so they could see her eyes clearly as she said, “he really is the King of the Underworld now,”

I watched as everyone’s eyes went wide and their mouths fell open. They stood in stunned silence for a few moments, before Stephen finally composed himself enough to say, “you know, I never considered that this might create new issues with Vlad. He might think Seph is a kindred spirit now that she can do this. This might cause jealousy issues.”

Finally, everyone relaxed and laughed. Andrei looked again at Sephie, then looked at me. “I think they’ve decided on the color though, Boss.” He pointed to her. “They’re still red.”

I quickly turned to look at her, surprised they hadn’t changed again already, “I wonder why it was so quick to change earlier but now they’re staying red.”

“Because it’s not me doing it this time. I didn’t realize it before, but I do now,” Sephie said.

“Really? What about the black though?” I asked. If it was Sephie’s demon switching her eyes to red, then did that take the place of the black now? 1 watched as her eyes slowly changed from red to black. Okay, new favorite transition. “Huh. What’s the difference if it’s your demon doing both then?”

She was quiet for a moment, then she looked at me and said, “the black is a warning to everyone else of who I am. The red is homage to you.”

“Shut up.”

“No, it’s true,” she said. “Wait, I can prove it. Bubba, come here.” She stood up from her spot on the counter and made Andrei stand next to me so we could both see her. “Full disclosure, I’m using Andrei because he’s so darn good at looking in my head,” she said as she positioned us the way she wanted us. “Okay, you watch,” she said to me. Then she looked at Andrei and said, “you watch too, but I want you to look in my head while I’m doing this so you know what I’m thinking about for each one.” She was looking only at Andrei as she switched her eyes to each color that we knew of. She’d even mastered switching them to white without losing control, but we still all felt her panic when she did switch them to white. She went from normal, to blue, to green, to amber, to both versions of white, to black, to purple all while looking at Andrei.

Then she looked only at me while she told Andrei, “keep looking in my head while I do this so you can verify that I’m thinking the same thoughts.” She ran through every color once again, but this time, her eyes turned red at the last. She smiled at me, then looked at Andrei. “I was thinking the exact same thoughts each time, wasn’t 17”

“Yeah,” he looked at me. “She thought the same sentence that she said earlier, about you really being the King of the Underworld when she was looking at me, but they never switched to red when she was only looking at me.”

“See? Special for you,” she said, her wide smile stretching across her face.

“Okay, I vote for special colors for all of us then, Green is mine. I think we can all agree I enjoy spicy Sephie the most. You guys can fight over the other colors,” Misha said, trying to stir up shit.

“Misha, you’re my favorite.” Sephie said, laughing.

Ivan had been quietly contemplating the news. He asked, “so this isn’t something you’re going to be using often, is it?”

I chuckled. “I said the same thing. No, it’s not. It’s basically the fail-safe, if you will. Those that Viktor can’t fix, Stephen will take care of. There will be a very select few that Stephen won’t be able to take care of. That’s when I’ll use it.”

“What happens to the souls that you condemn to Hell?” Misha asked.

“They stay there, along with the demons. Sephie’s dad told me I was the only one that could grant them reprieve once I’d condemned them. I’m still not entirely sure what that means, but I’m guessing they have to go through me to get out of Hell,” I said.

“Yeah, that’s a heavy responsibility,” Viktor said.

“Exactly why I’m not planning on using it very often,” I said.

“Is this why you feel different?” Andrei asked.

“You noticed it too?” Sephie asked Andrei. He nodded his head. “What does it feel like to you?” she asked him. “I’m curious if it’s the same as me.”

“He usually feels hot, like you. Also like Ivan. You three are always hot. It’s still there, but now there’s like ice there too, somehow, I don’t understand how that could be, but that’s the only way I know to explain it,” Andrei said.

“Yeah, that’s the same for me, too,” Sephie said. “It’s doesn’t make sense, but I don’t know how to describe it either.”

“Both Sephie’s dad and Sephie said it’s the balance between good and evil,” I said. I had leaned against the counter where Sephie had previously been sitting and pulled her back against me. She was still facing everyone else as we continued talking-

Andrei looked at her, smiling. “Sephie agrees,” he said. I turned her around enough I could see her deep purple eyes. I smiled at her, kissing her quickly. “Even Sephie feels a little different now, too. Did something happen to her too?” Andrei asked. He was studying Sephie as he asked the question, much like she was studying me earlier.

“It’s because of him, I think,” she said.

“She’s right. Because she’s so connected to me, she’s gaining power too. She’s going to give Ivan a boost too. You three will soon become connected with your demons, much like we have because of this, too,” I said.

“What about Viktor?” Ivan asked me and Sephie.

“I asked the same thing. He’s going to need Stephen’s help one more time and then he should be fine with everything. Yesterday helped tremendously. Kostya has been helping him every night as well,” I told him.

He nodded discreetly. Stephen was the one who brought it up to the rest of the group, asking Viktor, “how do you feel after yesterday? Better this time? Do you think you need it again? I don’t want you to be freaked out if we all suddenly show up with black eyes one day.”

Viktor chuckled. “Yeah, I think one more time. Just to be safe.”

“I told you Stephen already knows most of what we’re talking about before we tell him, “I told Sephie. She pulled my arms around her even tighter.

“I think we should stay here for another night. Dario can wait until tomorrow. I think it’s more important we have one more night where we don’t need to worry about anything extra,” Sephie announced.

Stephen raised his eyebrow looking at Viktor, “After lunch then?” Viktor agreed with that plan.

“Then it’s settled,” Sephie said. She turned in my arms to face me, her eyes were deep blue. I could feel her warmth spreading through my body.

“I must be extra special to get two colors all to myself,” I said to her, pushing her curls back from her face.

“You are extra special. Don’t let it go to your head,” she replied, grinning at me.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” I said, pressing my lips to hers.

I could feel her relax into me as I held her tightly, enjoying the quiet moment with her.

God, I love her.

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Adrik

While we ate lunch, the guys took the opportunity to talk to Sephie about her worry that she was condemning them to always feel what she felt.

“So, Boss told us all that you’re worried you’re condemning us to always have to feel what you feel because we’re so connected to you now,” Andrei said, after glancing at Misha and Stephen.

Sephie looked surprised, but she didn’t deny it. “I don’t know how to turn it off without making it worse,” she said.

“Why would you want to turn it off?” Misha asked.

“Because you guys don’t need to be in constant emotional turmoil just because I am,” she said quietly. We could all feel her sadness as she thought about the situation.

Stephen cleared his throat, but paused for a moment before he spoke. He’d been hanging around Ivan a little too much. His flair for the dramatic was growing. “Seph, I’m not sure I could describe the level of Hell that it is to be completely numb to everything and everyone day in and day out. It’s effective for survival, sure. But it’s not living. What you think of as emotional turmoil is really just a kickass reminder from you that it’s better to live than to simply survive. I will take your emotional turmoil over being numb every day of the week and twice on Sundays,” he said, in the serious manner that only he could deliver.

She chewed on her bottom lip, thinking about his words,

“It’s true, spider monkey. I also don’t think you’re taking into account the ridiculous control you have of your emotions. You share that with all of us To you, it might feel out of control. To us, you’re very much in control. You’re also showing us how to do it each time it happens. That’s not something that most men know how to do. I definitely did not. I just shoved everything down and then eventually blew up when no one was around. I prefer your method, if I’m being honest,” Andrei said.

“Same,” Misha said. “Except for the blowing up part. I chose to make jokes about anything and everything. Mostly inappropriately.”

Sephie giggled. “I mean, it’s effective. I still do the same.”

“The point is, gazelle, that we prefer the connection. You’re not condemning anyone. Given the choice to have the connection or not have the connection, we would all choose the connection every single time,” Misha said. I was honestly surprised he was so sincere. I didn’t know that kid had it in him. “Although, we’re going to have to figure out how to apply this knowledge to future girlfriends or this is just gonna be weird.” Yep, there’s that mostly inappropriate humor we all love.

Sephie laughed again. “I think we can find a way to apply it to normal, boring people. Or else you’re all going to have to find weirdos like me.”

“It would not be the worst thing in the world,” I said, smirking at her.

“I have to agree with them, princess. Much like Stephen, I spent most of the time just being numb or angry before we met you. I prefer feeling everything.” Ivan said. As he said it, even I could feel the love he had for her. It wasn’t just him, either.

“Even your demon agrees with that, Ivan,” I said. “I can feel it.”

“Upon further review, we’re going to need to start looking for weirdos like Sephie. What normal person is going to be okay with a statement like that?” Misha asked, laughing at the absurdity of it all. His laughter was infectious; we all joined in, enjoying a moment of relief.

She had gotten up to clean up from lunch. I stood up with her, pulling her to me. “When I first met you, Ms. Jackson told me that you would show me the best parts of myself if I let you. She was absolutely correct. But what she didn’t know was that you’d make those best parts even better. That’s what the connection is for all of us. You’re doing what you always do and showing us how to be better just by being you,” I said, kissing her temple.

Viktor, who had been quiet up to this point, chimed in. “What’s happening to us isn’t your fault, either, Sephie.” We all turned to look at him, surprised he would say such a thing. He looked slightly offended we would think it came from him. “That’s what she told me yesterday when we were gone. That if I needed someone to hate, it should be her since she’s the reason all of this has happened since we met her. I’m pretty sure she didn’t believe me yesterday, which is why I brought it up again.”

Surprisingly, I could feel everyone’s anger immediately. Sephie did too. Her eyes turned black, causing mine and Ivan’s to also go black. We all sat in stunned silence, brewing in our own anger that she would still be blaming herself for everything that had happened. Misha finally broke the silence. When he did, he was more angry than I’d ever seen that kid.

“Sephie, you’re going to cut that shit out right now,” he said. His face was starting to turn red, even. I expected Sephie to get angry in response to his tone, but i could easily feel her happiness. I looked down at her, noticing her grin starting to curl up one side of her mouth.

“His eyes,” she told me. When I looked at Misha, his eyes were much darker than his usual green.

“Get angrier, my adorable Russian guardian,” Sephie said to him calmly. Her statement caught him by surprise, but Andrei caught on to what was happening.

“Dude, your eyes are changing,” he told Misha.

“You’re going to need to go nuclear for it to happen the first time. We all did. It’ll get easier after that,” she said.

We watched as Misha let go completely and let his anger fully take over. I could feel it clearly. I wasn’t even sure I was feeling it through her this time. It felt as clear as anything I got from her. She was right, too. There was an element of f**kery behind his anger. Like he was already looking for ways to destroy you, but he wanted to make it entertaining while he did. I could even feel the difference now between Misha and his demon. It was like everything I felt from Misha was now as clear as everything I felt from Sephie and Ivan.

“You’re feeling everything just as clearly as I am, aren’t you?” she asked me.

“Yeah. It feels just as clear from him as it does you or Ivan now, “I responded.

“New level indeed,” she said, laughing in her head. She brought Ivan into the conversation, asking him what he felt.

“Misha feels much like you and Boss now. You two are still stronger, but he’s very similar now,” Ivan told us.

Misha’s eyes had turned almost black as he let his anger completely take over. Sephie recognized that he was struggling to contain it, however. We all felt her anger increase to insane levels as she walked to Misha. She just put her hand on his shoulder, showing him how to control his own. His eyes went wide as he figured out how she did it.

“That’s how you control it so easily,” Misha said in a half-whisper, still watching what she was showing him.

She smiled sweetly at him. “Now you try,” she said. We could feel Misha’s anger levels slowly lowering, but then they spiked again. She giggled as she knew he was just playing with us now.

Once Misha was calm once more, I said, “Sephie was right. There is an element of f**kery to your anger that nobody else has.”

“You could feel it too?” Misha asked.

I nodded my head. “You’re just as clear as Sephie and Ivan are for me now.”

“He can even tell the difference between you and your demon already,” she said.

I laughed. I hadn’t even told her that part. “I don’t know why it still surprises me that you read my mind, but it still sometimes does,” I said. She just grinned at me. She hugged Misha’s neck, explaining to him how the rest of us had progressed through this particular development in our lives. To say that Misha was excited for this would be an understatement. He looked like a kid on Christmas morning he was so happy this had happened.

Stephen looked at Viktor. “So, yeah. I think it’s time I helped you one more time. Just to be safe,” he said. Viktor just nodded and stood up to leave the kitchen without a word. I looked to Sephie, wanting to know what he was feeling.

“He’s not as worried as I thought he was going to be. He’s happy. He recognizes that it’s all something we want to happen and he’s happy for us. Stephen really is helping him. I think after this time, he’ll be fine with it and able to laugh about it,” she said.

There was an audible exhale from everyone still in the kitchen.

King of the Underworld

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Sephie

When Viktor came out from Stephen helping him one more time, he looked remarkably better. He'd looked better each time Stephen had helped him, but it looked like he was finally relaxed and happy this time. The rest of us were in the back room, on the couches, being rid iculous about something when they walked in.

"Papa Bear, you look much better this time," I said, smiling at him. The smile I got in return was enough to tell us all everything we needed to know.

"Even I can tell you feel better now and I don't usually pay attention," Misha said.

"I think I got it all this time," Stephen said. "I was somewhat concerned for my effectivity the other two times."

"He's been holding on to it for a long time. You could've asked for a boost, like with Sergei," I said.

"I know. Maybe I wanted to see if I could do it on my own," Stephen said, grinning at me.

"Independent. I'll allow it," I said.

"Okay, who has Andrei next or Stephen next?" Misha asked.

We all looked at both Andrei and Stephen. That was a tougher decision to make than I would've thought. They were both progressing at rapid rates. Andrei has had his gift for longer, but Stephen jumped in with both feet once he discovered his. It could go either way.

"My money is on Andrei," Ivan said. Adrik agreed with him.

"I'm going with Stephen," I said, which shocked everyone. "I know it should technically be Andrei that gets it next, but he's been more cautious about his gift the entire time. I also think he's more worried about controlling his anger when it happens, so it's going to take him longer. Stephen has more experience with that. I think he's going to be more willing to take that leap much sooner than Bubba," I said.

"You know that feeling that I assume one has when they're a kid and their parents tell them they're proud of them? That's what I'm feeling right now," Stephen said, his uncharacteristic smile stretching across his face.

"She's not wrong, Stephen. I agree with her. My money is on you, too," Andrei said.

"Apologies for snooping, but I noticed your uneasiness when I told Misha to get angrier. I'll show you what I showed him when you're ready. You'll be just fine, Bubba," I said to him silently.

"I know you'll help. I'm more worried about not breaking anything. The few times it's happened, I've always smashed something. Or someone. That's what I'm most worried about," he told me.

"We won't let that happen. But now you have to wait until Stephen figures it out so we'll win the bet pool," I said to him. I could hear him laughing along with me in my head, but neither of us gave any outward signs we were having this conversation. I did have to admit to enjoying my little private conversations with all of them probably more than I should.

We spent the afternoon relaxing and enjoying spending time together. They all got up and followed me to the kitchen while I started dinner. They all chipped in to help when needed, but continued on with the conversation.

Viktor's phone beeped. He pulled it from his pocket, chuckling as he read the message. "It's Trino. He wants to know if I can help him find a security team. He said he's not having the luck he thought he was going to."

"At least he can admit he was wrong," Adrik said, laughing.

"We do need to figure out how we're going to tell him about everything." Ivan said.

"Let's just spring it on him. Let's wait until Stephen and Andrei can switch their eyes too and then just all show up one day like that. I feel like that's

the best plan," I said, trying not to laugh.

Misha, who was standing next to me helping, looked at me. "It's like you took the words right out of my mo uth, gazelle," he said, his handsome smile beaming at me.

Adrik laughed. "As much as I would like to see that, I think we are going to need slightly more fact than that. But let's keep that shelved. I'm sure there's someone we'll be able to use it on at some point."

Misha glanced at me, then looked to Adrik. "Are we soulmates now too? Did that just happen? Because I feel like it did."

1 I elbowed Misha in the ribs. "I don't share. They all erupted into laughter as I finished up dinner.

I felt Adrik's warm hands around my waist as everyone helped themselves to food. He was watching everyone with me. "I might love it when you get possessive," he told me.

"I might love you," I responded, turning toward him, I was still laughing about the exchange as he leaned down and pressed his lips to mine. I turned around, leaning back against him once more as we watched everyone laughing and eating.

"We definitely needed this," he said.

"I agree. I'm glad we stayed one more night. We need to be better about coming here more regularly. I have a feeling once Trino gets security set up, it's going to get chaotic real quick."

He sighed. "I think you're right. We're going to need to come up with a plan for everything. It all needs to happen quickly, so we don't miss our chance at Ricardo and Martin."

I pulled his arms around me a little tighter. "We'll think about that tomorrow. Let's enjoy tonight," I said.

Trino stopped by the office toward the end of the day so Viktor could start going over setting up a security team for him. He had Chris and Keith show up as well so they could meet Trino and talk about their options.

It'd been a few weeks since any of us had seen Trino. He had plenty of his own people in the city. We were all sure he preferred them to having to listen to Russian any more than absolutely necessary.

Gus and Oscar were with him when he arrived. He also surprised me by bringing a woman with him. I was with Andrei and Misha at their desks when Viktor stepped off the elevator with all of them. They felt my surprise, immediately turning to see.

"He brought her for your approval," Andrei said. He could barely contain his grin..

I thought for a minute. "This could actually prove useful to us if she's not Trino worthy. It'll give him a first-hand look at what we can do now," I said. "I mean, I hope she's a nice girl and all. Just saying. I'm not hoping we have to expose her darker side."

Misha laughed. "I mean, I am. Not even gonna try to pretend I'm not."

I cut my eyes over at him. "I do love your love of the f**kery, Misha."

"It's my best quality."

Viktor took Trino and the other three into the conference room. Chris and Keith arrived shortly after, also joining them in the conference room. The elevator doors dinged once more, signaling Ivan's arrival. He immediately locked eyes with me once the doors opened.

Andrei chuckled. "He feels the f**kery."

Misha and I were still laughing when Ivan walked over. "What are you three getting into? Because I want to be a part of it," he said in Russian as he walked up.

| discreetly nodded toward the conference room. He turned to look, seeing the newest member of Trino's posse. "That is unexpected," he said.

"Can you see anything on her?" I asked. I tried to sound innocent, but it failed. It failed miserably.

Ivan laughed. "Now I understand. He studied her for a few minutes. "I don't see anything yet, but that doesn't mean there is nothing there."

"Sephie is pretending to hope that nothing is there, I don't give a f**k. I want there to be something there," Misha said.

"I'm Team Misha on this one. I would love it if there was something there. J haven't gotten to intimidate a love interest in a very long time, Ivan said. Misha just held his hand up so Ivan could high-live him.

1 looked at both of them as sternly as 1 could muster. "Only if there's a reason, Trino's very lonely. He just lost his mother. He needs someone to console him," I said. "Just not if she's a legit demon," I added, grinning at both of them.

King of the Underworld

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Sephie

Once Adrik had finished with his last meeting of the day, we waited for Stephen to come back after escorting that last meeting back to the lobby and we all joined Adrik in his office. Both Adrik and Stephen knew we were up to no good, just like Ivan did.

“One part of me loves that you’re all automatically in on it whenever something funny happens, but another part of me is frustrated because it kills. the suspense,” I said as we walked into the office. I quickly shared an image of Trino and his new lady friend to Adrik before Viktor brought them all to his office.

“That was unexpected,” he said. He thought for a minute, then added, “he wants your approval, no doubt.”

“I think he needs all of our approvals. He just doesn’t know it yet,” I said.

“Diabolical. I might love you a little more right now,” Adrik said, standing up and walking toward me.

I giggled as he wrapped his arms around me. We heard Viktor’s deep voice talking to Trino as they walked to the office door. Adrik quickly said to everyone, “I don’t care that she’s a potential love interest. Everyone gets thoroughly vetted now. That means Gus, Oscar, Chris, Keith, AND Trino. I’m taking no chances. You guys see or feel anything suspect on anyone, you let me know,”

I glanced over to see Andrei discreetly touch Stephen’s arm, so he got the message as well. We were still trying to think of ways to communicate with him that didn’t involve touching him, but we hadn’t figured out how to make it happen quite yet. He still required physical touch to get the message, but it happened instantly and someone could just brush his arm and convey the information to him.

We all carefully studied everyone as they walked in the office. Viktor was at ease with everyone, as everyone was at ease with Viktor. The woman that was with Trino seemed nervous, but she was walking into an office with six more giant men she didn’t know who were hired based on their abilities to intimidate people with one look. I could understand her apprehension.

“Trino. Now I understand why you’ve been MIA,” I said, smiling at him as he walked in, his arm around her.

He smiled at me, walking to me and Adrik. After he shook Adrik’s hand, he said, “Miha, I want you to meet Emilia.” She smiled shyly, extending her hand to me.

“Keep your hand on me, please. I’m borrowing your gift,” I told Adrik as I went to shake her hand. I didn’t feel Ivan’s bubble, which was a good sign for her. Bad sign for Misha. When my hand touched hers, I felt nothing but a moment of joy from her. Poor Misha was going to be so disappointed….

Emilia was practically a midget compared to the rest of us. She even made Trino look tall, but she was beautiful. She had jet black hair, olive skin, and golden-brown eyes. Her smile, while nervous, was genuine. Trino noticed me looking her over. He couldn’t keep the smile from his face as he said, in Italian, “you know I want your approval, Miha.”

My mouth fell open. “Since when did you learn Italian?” I asked him, still in Italian.

“It’s closer to Spanish than Russian. Baby steps,” he said, smiling proudly at me.

“That gives me hope for learning Spanish easily,” I said.

“If you picked up Russian that quickly, Spanish will be a breeze,” he said.

“Noted.” Trino was still smiling, but he was also looking very expectantly at me. I couldn’t help but laugh. “So far, so good, Trino. I need to hear her speak to give you the complete okay,” I told him. He nodded, pulling her with him toward one of the couches.

I quickly gave the guys a translation of what he’d just said to me. “I’m impressed he learned Italian,” Ivan said.

“Apparently he hated the thought of being left out of most of the conversations between us and Vitally if I didn’t insist on English for him, “I responded.

“Misha, stop pouting. There will be other chances,” Adrik said.

Misha couldn’t keep from laughing at being chastised for that. Everyone else looked at him, wondering why he was laughing. “So remember that one time when Giana cussed Martin out in Italian? Yeah, that was a good time,” he said, trying to cover. It was so absurd that it made me also laugh, which made the rest of the guys laugh. Trino and his group just thought they were being left out of a joke.

“Nice save, kid,” Ivan said, still laughing in his head.

“I gotta work on that, Clearly, “Misha responded, pretending to shove Stephen over so he could sit down next to him. To everyone else, it looked like they were clowning around. In reality, he’d just let Stephen in on our conversation. Even Stephen had trouble hiding his smile once he learned what Adrik had said.

“So, Emilia, how did you meet Trino?” I asked. She immediately looked petrified that I’d asked her anything. Poor thing was scared out of her mind.

I could feel Andrei zero in on the fact that she seemed overly scared. Before, I could never tell when he was actively fishing through anyone else’s head. I could feel him in mine, just as he could feel me when I went snooping through his, but I had never felt anything when he looked at anyone else. I knew he was just being thorough with her, which I appreciated.

She cleared her throat, looking at me. “We…we met kind of by accident,” she said. She glanced up at Trino, like she wasn’t sure she should say anything further.

Oscar laughed. “Trino literally ran into her on the street and knocked her down. She got up and cussed him out. Most romantic meeting ever,” he said.

Trino was laughing with Oscar. “She ripped me a new one. I think she might’ve bruised my sternum from her finger poking me as she cursed me and pretty much my entire family in Spanish.”

I raised my eyebrow, glancing around the room quickly. I could see that everyone else shared in my so far favorable impression of Emilia. I looked between Oscar and Gus, asking, “and what did he do in response?”

They both laughed. “He didn’t say anything at first, then he asked her to dinner. We were sure she was going to smack him, but she accepted instead,” Gus said.

I looked to Trino, unable to hide my smile. “I like her,” I said, in Italian.

“Me too,” he said, his smile stretching across his face.

“Bubba, did you find anything?” I asked. He glanced at me, shocked that I knew he’d been looking. I laughed, internally. “You were very discreet. I can feel you looking now, apparently

He exhaled, visibly relaxing. He shared what he could see of her aura, as he said, “nothing out of the ordinary. She actually really likes Trino. He told her everything right away. She knows who he is. She doesn’t know the extent of what we’re facing, but she’s fine with who he is. Sorry, Misha.”

“She needs Viktor though. I can see that,” I said, looking at what Andrei could see.

Ivan looked to Viktor, asking him in Russian, “how long does it take Kostya to fix someone? Like could you do it from a handshake?”

Viktor thought for a moment, then said, “it’s possible that’s all it would take. Unless there’s extensive damage. It takes longer in that case.”

“Judging by the others we’ve seen, I would not call this extensive damage,” Andrei said.

“Can Kostya be ready to help you tonight? Headlights off this time,” Ivan asked.

Viktor simply nodded. “I say we look at everyone. Viktor can fix as many as possible tonight without drawing too much attention to it. We can come up with a plan on how to tell Trino everything later,” Ivan told us all.

Adrik steered the normal conversation toward Trino’s security team, giving the rest of us time and space to go through everyone else in the room. Everyone checked out, much to my relief. I was beginning to get slightly paranoid at the constant betrayals we couldn’t seem to get away from.

The longer we talked, the more relaxed Emilia got too. She laughed along with everyone, she gave Trino a hard time a few times, and she seemed to be more at ease than when she first arrived. She whispered something to Trino at one point. He looked to me, asking where the bathroom is.

I stood up, along with Ivan and Andrei. “I can show her,” I said. While she had been relaxing, she was once again petrified that Ivan and Andrei had stood up with me. I laughed. “Don’t worry. They’re just very protective of me. They’re much nicer than they look.”

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Sephie

As we walked across the floor to the bathroom, Emilia very shyly asked me, “how long have you known Trino?*

I thought for a few minutes, glancing at Ivan and Andrei. “I actually don’t know the answer to that question. I’m terrible about keeping up with information like that. Like six months or so? Sure, that seems right.” I said, shrugging my shoulders.

She laughed. “We’ll go with that,” she said as she walked into the bathroom. I waited outside with Ivan and Andrei. Most everyone in the office had gone home for the day, but there were still a few overachievers still working ban and Andrei both put themselves between me and anyone left in the office without me having to say anything.

Ivan said, in Russian, “I haven’t seen anything on her. I also don’t have my usual murderous rage when it comes to chicks around her.”

“If ever there was a glowing endorsement, that should be it,” I said, laughing.

“She needs Viktor, but otherwise, I think she checks out. So far, everyone in the office has checked out from what I can see. Although I think we need to have a discussion about how much Keith hearts Stephen,” Andrei said

1 giggled. “I caught that too. Like maybe a little stalkery, even. Does Stephen still hang out with him?”

“When would he have time? He’s always with us now,” Ivan said, his sly grin curling up one side of his mo uth,

“And this is how Keith came to ha te us all so he decided to revenge move to Colombia,” I said as Emilia walked out of the bathroom. Her eyes were little wide when she heard us speaking Russian. “Don’t worry about that either. We were actually making jokes. Russian is just such a coarse language that anything sounds like a threat.”

“You could say the same for Spanish and Italian, honestly. My neighbor is Arabic though. They win the prize for harshest language ever,” she said as we walked back to the office.

“You might have a point there,” I said, laughing quietly. Adrik’s eyes landed on mine as we walked back through the door. Since he couldn’t see that my eyes changed, I pushed my warmth to him.

We heard Ivan laughing in our heads. “I can feel you two being f**king adorable right now,” he told us. I glanced at Ivan, completely surprised he could feel that and also apologetic he could feel that. “Don’t apologize, princess. I think I’m just extra sensitive to you both right now. It’s not a normul occurrence,” he told us.

I climbed in Adrik’s lap, wrapping his arms around me as Ivan sat down on the couch with us, I did catch Trino kissing Emilia’s hand as she sat down next to him. It was a very sweet moment.

One that was short-lived, as Adrik asked, “have you heard anything on Martin?”

Trino sighed, then cursed in Spanish. I don’t know why his cursing tirades always made me laugh, but they did. I think it only served to increase his anger each time, but I just couldn’t help myself. He finally said, “he’s still trying to take over while I’ve been gone. There are some pendejos that are working with him now, but some have stayed loyal to me. There are more that have stayed loyal to me in my network than are working with him, which is advantageous to their survival rate.”

“And what of the Mexicans?” I asked.

A devilish grin stretched across Trino’s face. “That’s where it gets really good. Since he switched sides, they’re trying to work with him again. But now he won’t work with them. My people tell me he’s severed ties with Sal and Ricardo. Something about him not getting payment he was owed. He’s du mb enough to think he can take over everything on his own.”

We couldn’t help but laugh. “We’re the reason he didn’t get that payment. We put her on a plane with a new ID so no one could find her,” Ivan said.

Emilia’s eyes went wide. “You’re talking about him getting paid with a girl?”

I laughed. “It was not our idea. We’re the ones that stopped it. Her godfather was the one that arranged it, for the record. We’re very pro-not using any humans as payment for anything.”

Trino cursed again. “Giana was the payment? Really?” he asked.

We all nodded. “Martin wanted in on Lorenzo’s human trafficking. He threatened to kidnap and sell her if she didn’t obey. She was payment for something happening in the city, but we never got that detail. She’s safe now. As long as she’s smart, no one will ever find her.” Adrik said.

Trino sat in stunned silence for a few moments, clearly shocked that Martin was capable of such things. He finally looked at Adrik, anger clearly visible on his face. “I’m going to enjoy ki lling him.”

Adrik felt me tense, but he just chuckled. “Yeah, so about that. It’s slightly more complicated than that.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

Adrik hesitated, not sure how to answer without just spilling everything right then. I squeezed his arms, answering for him. I said, in Italian, “remember those times we saved you from dying and then that one time my eyes went black in front of you?”

Trino nodded, saying, “that is not something I could easily forget.”

“The answer is connected to all of that. It’s much bigger than you know. Much, much bigger. We don’t know how much you want us to say in front of…everyone,” I said, glancing quickly at Emilia,

“How bad is i he asked.

“Worse than you could ever imagine,” I said.

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees as he considered his options. He glanced toward Chris and Keith, asking, “do they know?”

“Not yet. We’ve been trying to come up with a way to break it to you slowly, but that’s one of the tests they have to pass to be your security. Your last security team almost met with an untimely end because of their issues regarding me,” I said.

He scoffed. “You would’ve done me a favor, honestly.” He looked at Gus, then that, then glanced at Chris and Keith one more time. Finally, he looked at Emilia. He looked back to me. “She’s passed your approval process so far, Miha?” I nodded. “Good. We’ll see how she does in the advanced round,” he said, leaning back and sliding his arm around her shoulders.

“You’re sure?” I asked him in English.

“Miha, I owe you my life. You’re the reason I got to see my mother one last time. Whatever you’re about to tell me, pales in comparison to those two things, Trino answered in English.

“Oh boy,” I said, getting up to close the office door.

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“Miha, I owe you my life. You’re the reason I got to see my mother one last time. Whatever you’re about to tell me, pales in comparison to those two things.” Trino answered in English.

“Oh boy,” I said, getting up to close the office door.

King of the Underworld

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Sephir

As I walked to the door, I quickly updated the guys on my conversation. Ivan grinned as he got up and went to Adrik's bathroom to take his contacts out. I could feel the excitement from all of them. They were looking forward to the shock they were about to deliver.

When I returned to the couch, Adrik stood up, pulling me with him to the bathroom. We walked in as Ivan walked out. It took just a minute to take our contacts out and then we sat down with everyone once again. Since Misha's eyes had only changed once so far, he hadn't gotten contacts yet.

Andrei quietly leaned over and explained what was happening to Viktor, in Russian, so Chris, who was sitting close by, wouldn't understand.

As Adrik pulled me back into his lap, he said, "it started with Sephie and her ability to know things she shouldn't necessarily know. Not just the conversations in Italian. She knew details about the other bosses that most people would've missed. Over time, that ability grew. She started reading my mind very early on in our relationship, as well as all of the guys. It seemed like the stronger the connection got with her, the more she was able to do. Then Misha's ability to see the outcome of a plan morphed into being able to see you under attack the night the Mexicans came for you. One by one, we've each discovered a gift, if you will, that we have that nobody else does. It sounds somewhat crazy, but you've seen the result of it several * times now."

"It's why I'm sitting here right now, Jefe," Trino said.

"It is, but it's much more than just that," Adrik said. He squeezed me just a little tighter, glancing at Ivan. "Martin and Ricardo have both made deals to get further ahead in this lifetime."

"What kind of deal?" Trino asked.

"Deals that have eternal consequences," I said. I knew my eyes had switched to black without needing to see anyone else's. I saw the surprise on Trino's face, followed quickly by the sheer terror as he looked at Adrik and Ivari's black eves. I glanced over at Misha. His eyes now changed with ours as well.

"Misha, you're going to need contacts now, too. Yours are already changing with ours,"I told him.

"No deal! I'm not wearing contacts," he said. I could hear him laughing my head. How he managed to keep a straight face, I'll never know.

Trino took a deep breath, trying to gain composure. "I knew Miha's eyes changed, but I had no idea the rest of you could do it. I also don't know what it means. I just know that I kinda wanna run when I see it."

"I feel like running is a good life choice," Gus said, his eyes still the size of dinner plates.

"Martin and Ricardo have both made deals with very powerful demons. We are what can stop them," Adrik said.

I grinned, telling Trino, "brace yourself for what I'm about to say next, Trino, because you're not ready for it. He is the true King of the Underworld now," I said. I could see Trino's color drain from his face, which confirmed that my eyes had turned red again.

Stephen glanced at me, then looked back at Trino. "That's not even the scariest color, Trino, She's got others that are much more disturbing." The way he said it made it seem like my eyes changing colors was the most normal thing in the world. Normal really is relative

All Trino could do was curse under his breath for a few moments. Finally, be composed himself enough to simply ask, "how?"

We spent the next hour or so explaining everything to Trino. We didn't leave much out. He now knew about Armando. He knew of the end game for Martin and Ricardo, as well as the other bosses. We told him everything

To our surprise, once he got over his initial shock, he became quite curious about how it all worked. I ended up showing him what Andrei could see, as well as what Ivan could see. We showed him what it looked like when Viktor used Kostya to fix someone as well, telling him that they all needed Kostya and Viktor's help. We even gave him a glimpse at what Armando looked like after Stephen broke him, just because he asked.

"Jefe, I remember telling you that Sephie was always meant to meet you when I first met her. I had no idea how accurate that was," Trino said,

scratching his head. "I wish my abuela was here. She would be so excited right now."

"What's an abuela "Misha asked.

"Babushka," I told him.

"Sweet, I'm trilingual now."he responded.

"It's a lot to take in, Trino. It's been a lot for us to take in, even. It hasn't abrays been easy, but we've had help along the way. The demons that Martin and Ricardo made deals with are very old and very powerful. They could wreak a tremendous amount of have if they're allowed to remain for much longer. It might seem like Martin is fighting a losing battle right now, but I wouldn't put it past him to start recruiting other demons to hit cause to strengthen his numbers. Same for Ricardo. We haven't gotten word yet that any of the other bosses have made deals, but that's not to say it hasn't already happened or won't happen in the future. We've been told that you're a key figure in this. You know I reward those who stay loyal to me. That will never change," Adnik said.

Trino exhaled loudly. "After knowing this, I would be a foot to not remain loyal, And not just because I'm scared of your girlfriend, fefe –

I held my hand up, showing him my ring as I cleared my throat. "Future wife, thank you very much."

He cursed as he jumped up to come for a closer look. "Dios mio, Miha. Does your arm get tired carrying that around?"

"We've increased the weight training to compensate," Andrei said, very seriously.

Trino laughed. "It's perfect. Congratulations." He leaned in closer, saying quietly in Italian, "I might need the number for that jeweler sooner rather than later." He winked at me as he went to sit back down beside Emilia.

Ivan looked at Chris and Keith, who were still sitting in mostly stunned silence. "What about you two? Still in or you'd still like to run right about now? I'll open the door for you if it's the latter," he said.

"If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I would think you're all full of shit. I knew there was something different about Sephie when I saw her go against Mike. No offense, Sephie, you're incredibly talented and fast, but you're still a girl. It never made complete sense in my head that you dominated him so easily," Keith said. "Now it does."

"Except that really was all Sephie. Her demon only started stepping forward well after that happened. She really is that good," Ivan said.

"Okay, right back to not making sense," Keith said.

"She could still do the same to you both. She would just break a sweat now because you're catching up in your training," Andrei said, slightly miffed.

"I love you both, but you're not helping them feel any more comfortable right now, I told both Ivan and Andrei, trying not to laugh at how white both Chris and Keith had gone.

"Shit. My bad. I got confused. I forgot we were trying to make them feel better," Ivan said, cutting his eyes at me.

"I still love you. It is slightly irritating they would think I'd need help with that hot mess,"

"While I do find it somewhat offensive you would think she'd need help to beat someone as clearly inept as Mike was, it's not what matters at the moment. What matters is that you can handle knowing this is going on and you still want to be a part of it," Adrik said, making me laugh quietly.

"What exactly is the plan? Are they coming here? Are we going there?" Chris asked. He glanced around the room, adding, "I'm only asking because I need to make arrangements for my mom if I'm going to be gone for an extended period of time. If I'm moving somewhere, then she comes with me."

"Your mother will be taken care of. Whatever she needs. Don't worry," Trino said. "But he does bring up a valid question. Do you have a plan?"

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Adrik

“We’re still working on the plan, to be completely honest. We have people watching Ricardo in Italy. We’ve also gotten word that Niko and Vito are planning on coming back to the city. Since they’ve all been gone, the underbosses have stopped enforcing taxes. The people pushed back enough and the underbosses heard what happened to Lorenzo, Massimo, and Anthony. We think the cash flow is drying up, which is why they’re planning on coming back to the city,” I said.

“And what will happen when they come back? If you grab them, then it might mean you ruin your chance at getting Ricardo,” Trino said. His eyebrows were furrowed. He was thinking deeply on this matter.

“That’s also what we think, which is why we haven’t made a solid plan yet. We’ve been keeping tabs on Martin, but I think you know more about him than we do. Whatever we decide, it all needs to happen quickly. Martin can’t get word that Ricardo has been taken care of and vice versa,” I said.

We ordered dinner and kept talking for several more hours. To her credit, Emilia actually had a few good ideas along the way. She didn’t seem intimidated by the subject of the conversation and the longer she spent with us, the more relaxed she became. Even after finding out everything about us. Trino noticed. It was evident he fell a little more in love with her throughout the evening.

“Watching Trine and Emilia makes me feel like I need to apologize to everyone. We really are disgusting, “I told everyone silently.

Sephie laughed, making the others look at her. She took a page from Misha’s book and said, “remember when Trino used to beg me to come to Colombia to help him find a girlfriend? Turns out he needed to come here instead. Trino smiled broadly at her.

“Nice save, princess.”

After a few more minutes, the conversation turned back to the matter at hand. Stephen, who had been quiet for most of the evening, asked, “what are you thinking about the Mexicans once Martin is taken care of? Is that going to be enough to make them stop? There’s still the potential for war with them, I think.”

“Once I’m back in power, they’ll heel if they know what’s good for them. The messages I sent when I took over are still fresh for most of them. They’re only doing this now because they have the backing of Sal and the other bosses. That’s the only reason they’re bold enough to move against me. They know Jefe supports me, so they know if they want to keep their lives, they’ll do the same,” Trino said.

Stephen seemed satisfied with his answer, but both Sephie and I knew he was still mulling over something in his head. Misha, too. There was more to that question, but since he didn’t continue the conversation, I let it drop as well.

“What about Dario? What happened to him?” Trino asked.

“He’s still here. I’ve kept him well hidden. When I agreed to let him go, it was before most of this had happened. Sephie and Misha were the only ones that had any extra knowledge about people. We’re going to talk to him again to make sure we didn’t miss anything. As long as he checks out, he can still go free at the end of this,” I said.

“You think he was lying?” Trino asked.

“Not necessarily. But I want to make sure we didn’t miss anything. Now that we know what we’re dealing with on a larger scale, the likelihood that he was lying is much higher. Demons are tricky. That’s why it took us so long to pick up on Armando. His demon was savvy enough that it knew to step back anytime he was around Sephie,” I said.

“That’s why Armando appeared to be a moron, for the record. He had no recollection of anything that happened when his demon was running the show,” Ivan said.

Trino inhaled deeply. “That makes so much more sense. I was really wondering how someone as wealthy as him could be that f**king stupid. Does Giana know about all this? I wonder if she ever saw the differences in him.”

“If she did, we don’t know about it. He got her hooked on coke, so it’s possible she was just high as f**k for most of the time while she was with him,” Sephie said.

Emilia turned to look at Trino, surprise evident on her face. She said something to Trino in Spanish; her tone was deadly. He raised his eyebrows, trying not to laugh at her as the rest of his group snickered.

“She just told him she’d kill him if he ever did that to her, Sephie told us. “I picked up a few words and pieced it together. I have to say, I like her.”

Trino responded in Spanish, pulling her closer to him. He was clearly trying to reassure her that he would never do such a thing. Trino enjoyed partying, but he was never known to partake in his own product. The most I’d ever seen him do was have drinks while he was at a club. I had a feeling even that would calm down if he stayed serious about Emilia.

“Disgusting.”Ivan said, laughing in his head.

“In the most adorable way possible.” Sephie added. “Is it wrong that I find her threatening his life really endearing?”

The rest of us couldn’t help but laugh quietly. The others were beginning to suspect that there was some kind of communication they were missing out on. We might’ve left that part out when we told Tring everything. It was the only detail we kept back.

We were still deep in discussion, even as it was approaching midnight. I was thankful for the extra sleep Sephie and I had gotten over the weekend. It was coming in handy now.

“Gus, Oscar, what are the people in the city saying now? Do you know?” Sephie asked.

“They’re happy the bosses are gone, from what we can tell,” Gus said, looking to Oscar to see if he agreed.

Oscar nodded in agreement. “It got dicey with a few of the underbosses right after Sal left with the other two bosses. I’m sure that’s also a reason they stopped collecting taxes. One of them almost died because the people in that part of town came together and ambushed him and his guys. They’re much happier now that things are quiet.”

“They know Jefe was the reason that the brawn operation got shut down and they know he’s the reason the other bosses have run. They fully support him, from everything we’ve heard,” Gus said.

“We’re close to handing over the doctor that created brawn to the police. The DA came across some evidence that clearly shows Sal paid him to create brawn in the first place. He thinks he can prosecute him. There are a few other things that need to happen at the same time, but it will all benefit the people and make them happy with the mayor,” I said.

“It’s important to keep the people happy. I relied heavily on them when I took over. I have a feeling I’ll rely heavily on them when I go back to take care of Martin.” Trino said.

“You’ll have our help as well,” I said. Trino sighed. It was obvious the betrayal by Martin was still weighing heavily on him.

“Don’t worry. Trino. It’s all going to work out eventually. It’s just going to be messy first,” Sephie said, grinning at him.

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Adtrik

We finally made it upstairs around 2 am. Both Sephie and I were exhausted.

“While I know it needed to happen, I would’ve preferred to end the conversation like two hours ago,” Sephie said. “How does he stay up so late and still have so much energy?”

I laughed. “I can almost guarantee that he does not get up anywhere close to the same time we do, solnishko.” I watched her climb in bed and joined her after turning off the lights. As she laid across my chest in her favorite spot, I asked, “you still have a good feeling about everyone that was here?”

“Mmm hmm. I do want to know why Stephen brought up the Mexicans again though. I’m not sure what he was thinking, but I know he had a reason. I try to refrain from fishing with him as much as possible, Viktor too.” She paused, then giggled. “We also need to have a talk about how in love Keith is with Stephen still. Not sure how much time Stephen is spending with Keith anymore, but Keith is still very infatuated with him.”

“Stephen’s changed since he figured out his gift. He’s not so shy anymore. He’s got a quiet confidence to him that’s really evident now. I’m sure Keith has noticed. He probably finds it very attractive,” I said, running my hands over her back and through her hair.

“He is a s*xy beast now. You’re right,” she said, snuggling into me more. I could feel her happiness and contentment. It made me feel the same. Even though we were facing the biggest hurdle we likely ever would, I was finding myself enjoying every single moment with her.

When I woke the next morning, Sephie was just starting to stir next to me. Neither one of us had thought to close the blinds the night before so we could sleep a little longer. I was surprised that she woke up at all. I expected her to sleep in, but she lifted her head, resting her chin on my chest.

“Good morning. I think,” she said. She was still very sleepy, which made her a thousand times more adorable. She was so sleepy she didn’t catch me trying not to laugh at her struggling to wake up.

“You can go back to sleep, love. I know you’re still tired,” I said. “I’m still tired too.”

“It’s not fair that you have to get up and I don’t, though. Feels rude,” she said, tolling over to stretch beside me. “What kind of day do you have today?” she asked as she yawned, stretching her arms and legs, making her joints pop

“It’s light and I want to keep it that way. I want to talk to Dario tonight. That keeps getting pushed off, but I want to get it off my mind. It’s kind of been eating at me since Stephen brought it up,” I said.

Sephie rolled back toward me, once again laying across my chest. She rested her chin on my chest so she could look at me. “Me too. I’m still not convinced we made the wrong decision before, but I think we can find out more now. Do you want me to make Viktor schedule a nap for you this afternoon?” she asked, trying to hide her grin from me.

I laughed, flipping her onto her back. “Only if you take a nap with me. I wouldn’t say no to that,” I said, pressing my lips to hers. She wrapped her arms and legs around me, holding me tightly.

“I wouldn’t say no to that either. I’m still feeling extra needy when it comes to you lately. Like I don’t want to be any farther apart from you than absolutely necessary,” she said.

I smiled at her. “I feel the same,” I said. I sat up, pulling her up with me. “It’s strange, though. I can feel you just as well when we’re apart as I can when we’re in the same room now, so it’s almost like we’re never really apart. But I still want you with me at all times. I’ve been thinking of ways to get you to come to more meetings.”

She grinned at me. “There is that meeting with everyone on the building project at the end of the week that I must attend now. And if I have to sit through all your meetings, that’s much less time I have to spend spreading the f**kery around with all of the guys. I feel like the world will suffer as a result.”

God, I love her.

I laughed as she threw my shirt she’d worn to bed at my head. “See? F**kery,” she said, grinning at me.

I waited until she was pulling her shirt over her head and grabbed her, picking her up. “I love your f**kery, Sephie. I would never deny the world such a thing.” I said as I carried her out of the closet with me. She giggled as she tried to finish putting her shirt on in my arms. She finally gave up, instead wrapping her arms around my neck and resting her head on my shoulder. I could feel her contentment at being in my arms. It made it that much harder to let her go.

She sighed as 1 set her down so she could finish putting her shirt on before we walked out to the kitchen. We both knew that the guys were waiting on us already. She was still grinning at me as she straightened her shirt. When I went to open the bedroom door, she hopped on my back.

“The f**kery. It abounds,” she said, wrapping her arms around my neck once again.

The guys all looked just as tired as we were when we walked into the kitchen. Andrei was already making coffee for everyone as I deposited Sephie on

the counter.

“Is it wrong that I want you to call Trino to wake him up since we all have to be up right now?” Misha asked.

Sephie caught my eye, her mischievous grin still on her face. I stood in between her legs, leaning in to kiss her. “You were right. It does abound,” 1 said, laughing with her.

“My schedule is light today and I want to keep it that way. Do what you absolutely have to do today, but try to get some rest. I do want to talk to Dario tonight to get that out of the way. I don’t want it to get pushed back again,” I said to everyone. I had turned to face them. Sephie wrapped her arms around my waist and rested her chin on my shoulder.

*Stephen, what were you thinking about the Mexicans last night? I know there was more to your thought process than what you said. Just like I still think there’s more to why you brought up Dario,” Sephie asked.

“Something just doesn’t feel right about the Mexicans, I don’t know what though,” he said.

“Same for me. There was nothing specific that I was trying to find last night, but there was plenty of uneasiness when thinking about the Mexicans. I think we need to be careful with them,” Misha sand,

Sephie looked at Andrei, who was standing beside us. “Bubba, have you gotten anything about either of those things?”

He shook his head no. “Not exactly. There’s something nagging at me about Dorio, but I don’t know what. I haven’t thought much about the Mexicans, but when Stephen brought it up last night I noticed that Emilia got a little tense. She’s Mexican. She had an uncle that was killed when Trino first came to power,” he said.

I immediately felt Sephie’s worry come on strongly. “How does she feel about that? Could you tell?” she asked.

“Either she’s a very good actress or she’s mostly okay with it. I didn’t find anything nefarious, if that’s what you’re worried about,” he said.

We felt her worry lessen, but only slightly. I turned toward her, only to find her eyes swirling. The white was clearly present in all her colors. “I’ll find a time to bring it up to Trino. I can’t imagine she would’ve been able to get that past all of us if she’s holding a grudge against Trino for it and wants some kind of revenge,” I said, placing my hand against her cheek.

She chewed on her bottom lip as she contemplated everything.

“It’s worth keeping an eye on, at the very least. Trino has been the only one that’s stayed loyal. I would hate to see him taken down by someone he loves,” Ivan said.

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Sephle

We were all in Adrik's office, waiting for Viktor to bring Dario back. Everyone was still tired from our late night with Trino the night before, but we'd all been on edge about Dario ever since Stephen brought it up. 1, for one, was happy to get it checked off the list of things we needed to be worrying

about.

Viktor walked in with Dario a few minutes later. He looked much better than the last time I'd seen him. He had shaved his heard; his hair was neater, He looked a little happier than last time. I caught myself studying him more closely as he walked in the office. I watched Adrik as he shook hands with him, not seeing anything out of the ordinary.

Viktor had said that Dario had been grateful the entire time he'd been at the building. He never complained. He always asked the guards that were on him to send word to Adrik that he appreciated everything. He was really happy to get moved to a better room over the weekend, telling the guards be liked the bed better in the new room. He'd requested a few books to read, but otherwise, he was quiet and kept to himself.

The last time we saw him, he looked frightened. Scattered, even. He couldn't focus on one thing for very long. I was surprised when he wouldn't look at any of us in the eyes for very long. It took me a bit to get him to look at me when we talked to him before. This time, he seemed more confident again. Calmer. It seemed like his time away from Massimo had been good for him.

He greeted everyone politely, taking a seat across from Adrik's desk. I was on the cabinet behind his desk in my favorite spot to watch people. I glanced at Ivan when Dario sat down. He shook his head no.

"I can't see anything. He doesn't even have anything hanging around him," he told me.

Andrei shared what he was seeing. Surprisingly, his aura didn't look that bad. It was in need of repair, but compared to the man we'd seen before, 1 was surprised at how strong his aura was this time.

I didn't feel Misha's nausea, either, which was also a favorable sign for Dario,

"How are things working out with the other bosses?" Dario asked. He'd been kept in the dark about everything that had happened with the other bosses. He didn't know about any of it.

Adrik inhaled deeply. "There are only three left, along with Ricardo."

Dario chuckled. "What of Lorenzo?"

"Dead."

"What three are left, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Niko, Vito, and Sal."

Dario was quiet for a few moments. He looked visibly relieved to learn that Massimo was no longer among the living. "What happened to Massimo?"

"Trino lit him on fire and threw him off a cliff," I said, flatly.

Dario clearly didn't believe me at first. He thought I was joking.

"She's telling the truth. I can show you the video if you like," Adrik said.

"I would, actually, I think that's a fitting end to the horrors that man caused during his life," Dario said.

Adrik scrolled through his phone to find the video and tossed it to Dario. He replayed it several times, obviously enjoying it."

"I never thought I would outlive him," he said, almost in a whisper.

"What do you know about Ricardo De Luca?" Adrik asked.

"He's close with Armando. Always has been. I think Sal has done business with him as well. There was always something about him that Massimo didn't like, so we kept our business with him to a minimum. He was never into the illegal side of things, from what I know," Dario said.

"Did Massimo ever say what it was he didn't like about him?" Ivan asked.

"No, not specifically. It was much the same as with Sal. It

like Massimo didn't want competition. He enjoyed knowing he was the most evil."

"What do you know about Anthony? Did you know his mother? Was Sal with her or was she just a fling that resulted in pregnancy?" I asked.

Dario looked directly at me for a moment before he answered. "You already suspect something or you wouldn't be asking me. Anthony wasn't Sal's kid. He was Massimo's kid. Massimo was married at the time that his mistress got pregnant. She tried to break up his marriage, so he cut her off to get back at her. Sal found out and took her in. Raised Anthony as his own, just to have insurance against Massimo. He told Massimo he would kill Anthony if he ever tried to move against him."

"But how did that work? If Massimo cut Anthony's mother off, why would he care if Sal killed Anthony? Misha asked.

"It was more the principal of it for Massimo. Not that he had any love for Anthony. He just didn't want to live a life knowing that Sal had killed one of his children," Dario said.

"Wow," I said, under my breath. "Did Anthony know Massimo was his real father?"

"That, I don't know. He should've at least suspected. He didn't look anything like Sal's other kids. He did look like Massimo's other kids."

"How many other kids did Massimo have?" I asked.

"Two others beside Anthony. One girl, one boy. Neither were interested in the business, Last I knew. Both are spoiled completely rotten and just want to spend money without having to work to ear it."

"What about Sal? How many kids does he have, besides Anthony?" Ivan asked.

"Sal has a lot of kids and grandkids, too. He started having kids when he was still young, so he has quite a few with a few kids of their own now." He thought for a moment, like he was counting in his head. "I think he has 10 kids, unless I've forgotten one. Anthony makes 11,"

"No, he has 10 kids. Along with the one less brother," I said.

"Really?" Dario looked to Adrik, who confirmed my statement. "Huh. How did Sal take that?"

"Not well. He fled to Italy, with Niko and Vito close behind him," Adrik said.

"What of their underbosses?"

"They've basically abandoned the bosses they work for. They stopped collecting taxes very shortly after the three bosses left. They all heard what happened to Anthony, Lorenzo, and Massimo. They all knew that no one has seen you or Armando in months. They're scared," Adrik said.

"Is Armando dead too?" Dario asked.

"Yes," Adrik said. We decided it would just be easier to tell everyone that he was dead rather than come up with an excuse for what happened to him. Saying "he's locked in his body with a demon being horrifically tortured until his body dies" just didn't seem like a plausible answer to the question of where Armando was,

"You work quick," Dario said. "I can't say I'm disappointed about that."

"Anything strange?" Adrik asked everyone silently.

"Nothing from me. He doesn't even have anything hanging around him," Ivan said.

"Nothing from me. I checked. He really will tive a quiet life if we let him go. Nobody will ever see him again," Misha responded.

"He could use Viktor, but I found nothing that warranted worry. He's actually much better this time than he was last time we talked to him,"Andrei said.

T'

*I agree with Andrei. I think giving him hope again helped him cope with everything he's been through. I don't get anything had from him at all. Bubba, can you check with Stephen?"1 asked, since Andrei was sitting close to Stephen. He leaned over and brushed Stephen's arm. Stephen shook his head no. He looked to me, giving me a quick thumbs up.

"You're still going to be able to leave once this is over. I can't tell you how long it will take, though. Ricardo is a different sort of monster. It's as much for your safety that I'm keeping you here as it is anything else," Adrik sahl.

"I can get information from Sal, if you need it. He'll think he's going to get my area of the city if he helps me. I can tell him I got away from Trino and have been in hiding. I'm happy to help speed this process along as much as I can, Dario said.

"He really does want to help, not just because he wants to disappear. He wants payback from Sal. I'm not entirely sure why yet though," Andrei said, silenti

I started to fish further in Dario's head, looking for the answer to that question.

Sephie

What I found in Dario’s head was not wholly unexpected, but it was surprising that it came from Sal and not Massimo. The reason he was so willing to help us get information from Sal was because Sal had been the one to tell Dario’s family about his family dying when he was younger. Sal is the one that told them Massimo killed Dario’s parents, but Sal also framed it like Dario knew about the plan and was in on the plan.

“Bubba, you’re seeing this too, right?”I asked, Andrei.

“Yeah, I knew Sal was evil, but this is past even what I thought he was capable of. Why would he do this?”

“I’m not entirely sure, but I want to ask him about it.”

1 quickly shared what we’d found with Adrik, who was equally as shocked as Andrei and I. “That’s a good reason to want revenge on a person,” he said.

“I agree. I want to ask him about it and see his reaction. Just ask him why he wants to help us take down Sal. It can’t be just because he wants to go free,” 1

told Adrik

Adrik looked at Dario. “Is there another reason you’re offering to help take down Sal, Dario?” Adrik’s gaze was intense enough that 9 times out of 10, when he would ask a direct question like that, the person would always give a truthful answer. There was something about Adrik that usually compelled people to tell him the truth. That attribute had only grown stronger lately. His intimidation factor was ever present, even when he didn’t mean to. Most people got the feeling that he was looking at their soul when he stared at them. It made many people uncomfortable.

Dario adjusted his position in the chair he was in, contemplating his answer. He decided the truth was the best option. “Sal is the one that told my family about Massimo killing my parents when I was young. That wouldn’t have been the end of the world, except he made it seem like I knew about the plan and went along with it. My family was so disgusted with me that they left. Massimo is to blame for a lot of things, and he’s partially to blame for that too, but Sal is the real reason my family left me and won’t speak to me.”

“Why would he do such a thing?” Misha asked, completely appalled at Sal’s behavior.

Dario shrugged his shoulders. “Evil doesn’t need a reason.”

“Dario, you keep talking about Massimo and Sal and referring to them as evil. Granted, they’ve done many evil acts. That’s not being argued here. I’m just curious if you’ve ever seen anything else that makes you think of them as evil?” I asked.

He looked slightly uncomfortable at my question; he didn’t answer right away. Everyone picked up on his unease.

I could feel Andrei looking further through Dario’s mind, as well as feel Misha’s nausea as Dario thought about Massimo and Sal. Ivan still felt normal and Stephen still felt normal, so it wasn’t anything to do with Dario himself, but he knew more about Massimo and Sal than he was saying.

He opened his mouth to speak, but then stopped himself, trying to find the words to say.

“Dario, do you know if either of them made any deals? Like say, for their souls?” I asked, just to see what would happen.

His eyes went wide as he looked at me. “How did you know about that?” he asked.

“There’s a lot of things I know that I shouldn’t,” I said. “Which one was it? Sal or Massimo?”

“Sal, Massimo never knew about it, from what I know. He would’ve wanted his own deal had he known.”

We all breathed a sigh of relief to know that Massimo hadn’t made a deal with a powerful enough demon that he would reincarnate into roughly the same person each time. Now that we all know what we knew, I was slightly disappointed that we’d let Trino kill Massimo. It would’ve been better had Stephen broken him, the same as Armando.

“Do you know the details of that deal?” Adrik asked.

He shook his head no, as he said, “no, not specifically, Sal just told me that he made a deal with something very powerful. He tried to talk me into doing the same. Said he could get my family back, even. He also promised I could have exponentially more power if I did it.”

“So why did you say no?” Ivan asked.

*Something didn’t feel right. It wasn’t that long ago that Sal told me about it. After that night at the restaurant when Ghost came back, for sure. I think it was when he found out that Sephie knew everything about Massimo. He said then he was going to use her to get to Ghost so he could kill him and that he had enough power to do so now,” Dario said, “It was shortly after that when Massimo and I went to Colombia, so I never heard any more about it.”

Adrik laughed. “His demon also oversold and underdelivered.” A few of us snickered at Sal thinking he would be successful in overthrowing Adrik.

“What do you mean? His demon?” Dario asked.

“That’s what he made a deal with. Basically, he literally sold his soul,” Adrik said.

“That would imply he had one to begin with,” Dario said thoughtfully. While he was not trying to be funny when he said it, it did make all of us laugh. We unwittingly made him nervous by laughing at him, until we assured him none of it was a joke.

“Dario, there are things happening that are not easily explained and Sal and Ricardo are at the center of them. There is a network of people around the world trying to take them down. Not just us,” Adrik said,

Dario thought for a few minutes, then looked at Adrik. “I can get information. I don’t know what else I can do, but I can at least do that. If what you’ve said is true, then he must be stopped. His entire family must be stopped. His children take after him in every way. Even the girls. Anthony was not an anomaly.”

Adrik looked at Ivan, the two of them clearly having a silent conversation that the rest of us weren’t privy to. I didn’t get anything but honesty from Dario, nor did Andrei. He passed Misha’s tests as well. We really could use all the help we could get at this point. If he was able to get information directly from Sal, it would make our lives much easier. Battista didn’t even know about Sal’s deal yet. We clearly needed some more help.

Adrik sighed. “I have no issue with you talking to Sal on the phone, but anything past that is not going to be safe for you. I’m not worried about betrayal, even. That would mean you’re dead with the rest of them. I’m worried about your life being in jeopardy if they know where you are.”

Dario looked surprised at Adrik’s statement. Like he wasn’t expecting Adrik to be worried for his safety. He thought for a few moments, then said, “Sal knows how paranoid I am. He also knows how secretive I can be. If I tell him I’m in hiding, he likely won’t ask anything past that, as he knows he won’t get an answer. He knows what happened to Massimo?”

“We’re not sure. He had already fled to Italy when Massimo was killed,” Adrik said.

“Eh. Then I tell him what happened to Massimo. I tell him I escaped and made it somewhere safe, but they’re looking for me. I want to know what he’s going to do to make it safe for me to return to the city. Then maybe I offer my area and Massimo’s area for helping me. He won’t be able to turn that down. He’s too f**king greedy,” Dario said.

“It could work,” Ivan said in Russian, after thinking about it for a few minutes. “We need information on Sal. Anything helps, at this point.”

Viktor agreed with Ivan, adding, “just on the off chance that Sal can trace his call, we can make it look like he’s anywhere in the world but here. Sal won’t be able to tell the difference.”

Adrik looked to Misha, who was checking on outcomes. He finally returned to the present, saying, “he’ll be useful. There’s multiple ways this plays out. though.”

“We can discuss that later. The important issue is whether to let him talk to Sal and whether that benefits us or hurts us,” Adrik said.

“It will benefit us in each scenario,” Misha said.

Adrik looked back to Dario, asking him in English, “you’re sure you want to help us get information from Sal? You can say no. It changes nothing about our deal. You still go free at the end.”

“I want to help. I’m tired of ignoring the evil he’s done. If I can help hurry along his comeuppance. I’ll gladly do it,” Dario said.

Adrik simply nodded once. The conversation ended shortly after and Dario was taken back to his room. Once Viktor came back, we moved upstairs to

the penthouse since that was the only spot we really felt comfortable discussing; anything these days.

King of the Underworld

Sephie

“What were you two discussing 1 asked, looking between Adrik and Ivan.

Ivan’s mischievous grin spread across his face. “I thought the whole point of being able to communicate telepathically was that no one else would notice when it happened?”

“No one else but her,” Adrik said, pulling me to him. He turned me toward him, his palm resting on my cheek. “Much like what you witnessed in Battista’s associate’s head, I don’t think you need the details of that conversation, solnishko.”

He didn’t need to say anymore. I knew it was not something I was going to enjoy knowing, so I happily let it drop.

“It’s so weird when she doesn’t argue,” Ivan said, trying to sound serious.

Adrik put the back of his hand on my forehead, like he was checking my temperature. “She doesn’t feel like she’s got a fever, but that doesn’t mean she’s not coming down with something “

1 playfully punched him in the ribs as I turned and walked toward the bedroom to take my contacts out. He caught me as I got halfway down the hallway, wrapping his arms around me as he walked us both back to the bedroom. I could feel his happiness at having me in his arms. I knew he could feel mine, as well.

He waited patiently while I took my contacts out, then spun me around to face him. His lips immediately found mine, kissing me deeply. He broke the -kiss, leaning back far enough that he could see my eyes. The sweet look of satisfaction on his face told me they were deep blue. He caught me

smirking at him. “What’s that look for?” he asked as he traded places with me to take his contacts out.

“You get a look of satisfaction on your face when my eyes turn blue. And only when my eyes turn blue. It’s the only color I’m 100% positive on each time it happens, just by the look on your face,” I said. I wrapped my arms around his waist and rested my head in between his shoulder blades while | waited for him to take his contacts out.

“That’s because it’s my absolute favorite,” he said as he turned around to face nie.

“You’re my absolute favorite,” I said, standing on my toes to kiss him again. He groaned softly as he pulled me against him completely. His lips were still on mine as he slowly walked us out of the bathroom, toward the bedroom door again. I could feel his reluctance to let go of me as we made it to the bedroom door. It made me giggle.

“You’re not the only one who’s feeling extra needy lately, apparently,” he said, finally coming up for air.

“What is wrong with us,” I said, wistfully as I pulled his arms around me tighter as we walked back to the kitchen.

I started on dinner as we discussed our conversation with Dario, as well as the conversation with Trino from the night before.

I finally looked to Stephen, asking, “how about now? Does anything still feel off to you about Dario after talking to him tonight?”

In his normal serious way, he thought for a moment before replying. “No, I think it was Sal’s deal that was the reason we all needed to have that conversation. I don’t know how Battista found out about Ricardo and Martin, but he clearly doesn’t know about Sal yet.”

“Maybe because his deal is so new? Although, I guess technically, so is Martin’s deal. Maybe Sal made a deal with a much less powerful demon so it didn’t show up on whatever demon radar Battista has at his disposal?” Misha asked.

I was still interested in knowing why Stephen thought about Dario and why something felt off. It seemed slightly out of character, but not in a bad way. In a he might’ve leveled up and we hadn’t caught it way.

I caught Adrik studying Stephen as he talked. He clearly suspected something else as well. “Stephen, you’re beginning to be able to sense demons, aren’t you?” he asked.

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“I think I might be, yes. It’s hard to tell, because you’re all still normal to me, but I’m thinking that’s why I brought Dario up. I think I knew about Sal’s deal, without knowing about Sal’s deal,” he said.

“Is that why something feels off to you about the Mexicans as well?” I asked.

He thought for a moment. “Maybe. It’s a different feeling with them.”

“Misha, do you think you can find any clarity for that?” Adrik asked.

“I can try.” Misha said. He looked to me expecting me to help, but Adrik vetoed the idea, surprising everyone.

“Misha, now that you’re connected to your demon, you can use it as your battery source. If you still need an extra boost now and then, you can use Sephie and Andrei, but you can do this on your own now,” Adrik said. His tone was soft enough that Misha knew he was encouraging him, but firm enough that Misha knew better than to not at least try it on his own before asking for more help.

Because he was much more discreet about using his gift now, he no longer got the faraway look in his eye. However, since he was relying on his demon as an extra battery source, his eyes turned black while he was trying to find the answer. When he came back to the present, he was surprised to see all of our black eyes staring back at him.

I laughed. “Your eyes turn black because you’re using your demon as a power source. Ours are just here for emotional support”

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He laughed, his eyes changing back to their normal green. “I didn’t see any deals being made, but there is some kind of black magic

OF something like it being used by the Mexicans. Mostly against Martin, from what I could tell. I’ve really gotta learn Spanish if we’re going to keep spying on these people.”

Adrik didn’t even need to look at me for me to know what he was thinking. “Show me, Misha. Maybe I can pick up a few words,” I said, extending hand to him. Adrik just smirked at me, loving that I read his mind.

Misha showed me what he found. The entire time I watched what he’d found, I didn’t feel his nausea once. When the movie was over, I looked at him,

somewhat confused. “No nausea?” I asked.

He looked surprised. He hadn’t thought about it. “No, now that you mention it. No nausea.”

“What if what they’re doing isn’t black magic, but whi te? What if they somehow know of Martin’s deal and they’re trying to protect themselves? 1 caught a few words but not enough to know for sure. What you saw, though, was them praying to Santa Muerte, or the Saint of Death. She’s a well- known saint for drug cartels, especially in Mexico. They pray to her to avoid authorities. Maybe they’re praying to her to avoid Martin?” I said.

“I’m sure Trino would know,” Adrik said. “You can show him and see what they’re saying.”

“I do think learning Spanish should be higher on my priority list,” I said. “But that somewhat explains why Misha didn’t feel any nausea when he saw it happening.”

“Yeah, I didn’t even notice that and it’s my own warning system,” Misha said, slightly embarrassed.

I laughed. “Don’t feel bad. You were understandably excited that it worked to use your demon as a battery source. You were distracted.”

His wide smile stretched across his face. “I was excited. Not gonna lie.”

“It was just as clear as when you use Sephie and Andrei?” Adrik asked.

Misha nodded. “Yeah, it was like having one of them help me.”

“It’ll get easier as you do it more often and it’ll get clearer too. The more you rely on your demon and let it help you, the stronger the connection will get,” Adrik said.

“Quick question: does that also mean it’s going to want more pancakes? If so, I’m going to need to start running more to compensate,” Misha said, somehow managing to keep a straight face through that entire sentence.

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King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 491

1

Sephie

We continued our discussion over dinner, but it finally changed to somewhat lighter subjects. Andrei finally asked Stephen, “so how much are you still hanging out with Keith?”

Stephen seemed surprised by the question. “Not that much, honestly. I’m always with you guys now. I kind of don’t have time. Why?”

“He still very much pines for you,” I said, smiling at him. “We noticed it when we were checking everyone out last night.”

“Oh,” he said, almost shyly.

“I don’t want to embarrass you about it. We just thought you should know that he’s still carrying that torch for you,” I said.

“You’ve changed since you discovered your gift, Stephen. You have a quiet confidence you that’s very noticeable now. I’m sure he finds that attractive,” Adrik said.

“I do?” he asked.

“You do.” Adrik said.

“You’ve always been hilarious, but you kept it hidden away. You’re letting everyone se it, as well as your intelligence now. It’s no surprise he’s still wildly attracted to you,” I said.

“Wildly attracted’ is putting it mildly,” Andrei said, smirking at Stephen.

“Huh. I had not noticed,” he said.

“How could you? You’re always with us. Getting c|*ck-blocked,” Ivan said, laughing. I used another round of laughter from everyone.

I snapped my fingers, pointing at Ivan. “I told you I was holding you guys back from getting laid!” They could all feel my amusement at the situation, so none of them took me seriously. It did remind me, however, to ask Viktor about Ilya. “Have you talked to Ilya? Did he call Jessica after the fundraiser?” I asked him.

His deep laugh filled the kitchen. “He did. They’ve already gone on at least one date

“You guys are going to have to cycle through to Vitaliy’s team if you ever want to get hid,” I said. “We’ll come up with an exchange program. It’ll work out smashingly well.”

Once the laughter died down, Stephen said, “Seph, you’re not keeping us from anything. Stop thinking that. We choose to hang out up here over doing other stuff.”

“You keep saying that. I still don’t entirely believe it, but I love you for saying it anyway,” I said.

“I mean, our dinner conversations alone are more interesting than anyone else I’ve ever dated,” Stephen said.

“Now I know you’re lying. You can’t tell me we have better dinner conversations than Vlad, I mean, the ambience of his dinners alone wins everything. Who doesn’t want impaled boyars around the feast table?” I said.

Stephen laughed loudly. “I rest my case,” he said.

Viktor chuckled. “Vitaliy asked Ilya about Vlad.”

-Shut up.”

“He did. Ilya said he’d never met him, but he knew he was a friend of Stephen’s,” Viktor said, causing all of us to laugh even harder.

“Did he believe lim?” Ivan asked.

“Ilya thinks he was mostly satisfied with the answer, but just the fact that he asked him about Vlad means he’s curious about this weird character we keep referencing.” Viktor said.

“We should just pay someone to pretend to be Vlad. Make him into a real person for Vitaliy,” Misha said.

“Give him a pet red panda while we’re at it,” Adrik said.

“You have the money. You can make this dream a reality.” I said.

As everyone sat around the kitchen, laughing uncontrollably at the absurdity we’d created for ourselves, I couldn’t help but love every single one of them a little bit more. They were so much fun. The joy that they brought me on a daily basis was something I never would’ve thought possible when I first met them all.

“I love you all so much right now,” I said, wiping the tears from my eyes from laughing so hard.

Stephen got up and walked to me, sliding his arm around my shoulders. “See why I want to hang out with you guys and not anyone else now?” he said, kissing the top of my head. I grabbed his arm, keeping him with me for a few moments.

As we calmed down, the conversation turned back to more serious matters. “We heard from the mayor about Dr. Moretti. Eric is ready to charge him for creating brawn. He won’t be charged for any of his back-room procedures as of now, because no one can remember him, but Eric feels certain that he can make the charges stick for the brawn and he’ll go away for a very long time,” Viktor said.

I felt Stephen’s anger slowly rising as the doctor’s name was mentioned. His hold on my shoulders tightened slightly as well.

“Surely there’s a way to make him pay for all those procedures he did, too?” he said, almost through gritted teeth.

“Because nobody but Sephie can remember him, there’s no proof. I’m not making her testify against him, either,” Adrik said.

Stephen’s anger continued to rise, at the injustice of it all. I knew what was about to happen, but Stephen was so outwardly calm that no one else had caught on just yet. “What does Eric think the sentence will be if he’s found guilty for the brawn?” asked.

“15 to 25, I think he said?” Viktor said.

That was the push Stephen needed to lose control of his anger. He stepped back from ine, putting his hands in his pockets. He knew he was losing control and was trying his best to not let it happen. As soon as he stepped back from me, everyone els figured out what was happening. They all went on high alert, but stayed where they were.

I turned to Stephen, telling him to let go. “You’re going to have to go completely nucar for it to happen, Stephen. I can show you how to control it, but I have a feeling you won’t need me,” I said.

We watched as his breathing rate increased slightly; his cheeks flushed. He had been looking at the floor, but he looked up at me as I was talking to him. His eyes were normally hazel, but right now, they were almost black. I could feel his anger, but I could feel him trying to contain it. Knowing how independent he liked to be, I waited to see if he could master it on his own before helping him.

It took him a few more moments, but he eventually began to calm himself down and his eyes returned to their normal hazel color. Adrik had been watching him the entire time, studying him as well as his demon. “Your demon is colder than normal, top. Just like you. Even though your anger burns just as hot as ours, it comes from ice,” Adrik said.

Ivan chuckled. “That makes no sense and yet, it makes perfect sense.”

“I think it needs to be that way. Stephen is the closest to you when it comes to sending people to Hell, if you will. He just sends them to their own darkness instead. He needs to be able to withstand the cold that comes with that,” I said, looking at Ark. “I do, however, think everyone needs contacts now, though,” I said as hyot up to give Stephen a hug. His vampiric vice-grip held me tightly. I could feel he was happy about this finally happening to him. I could also feel he was proud of himself for doing it on his own.

“I’m proud of you, too. I knew you could figure it out without me,” I said silently to him Since I was already touching him, he got the message night away. He didn’t say a word, he just held me tighter for a moment longer.

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Adrik

Watching Stephen finally connect with his demon was somewhat different for me. As Teore time lapsed, the differences in everyone’s demons were becoming clearer to me. Everyone shared certain attributes with their demons. Misha’s liked the *ukery. Stephen’s was cold, calculated. Ivan’s was deadly and just barely contained chaos. I suspected Andrei’s would be calm but lethal, just like how Sephie had describd his anger.

It was easier to tell the difference between Sephie and her demon. Her demon was just as opinionated as she was, but thankfully, they agreed on almost everything. While I was somewhat curious to see what that disagreement would look like, I was sure it was easier for her demon to just go along with Sephie’s opinion.

Mine was proving to be quite helpful. He’s what figured out Stephen was starting to sense other demons, much like I could. I think Stephen was right; we all felt something off about Sal, which is why we needed to talk to Dario. When I asked Stephen about his new level and he confirmed it, my demon was extremely proud of himself. It was hard not to laugh at his exuberance. Little guy is really taking to this sing his powers for good thing….

“Misha, you said there are multiple ways that everything plays out. What were they? Sephie asked.

“One scenario, they come here. The other scenario, we take the fight to them. I don’t know specifics about either. I was just shown both scenarios, but Dario helps us in both,” he said.

“I think we need to have another conversation with Battista, as well as explore both those scenarios. I wouldn’t mind taking the fight to them if it means sparing the city. There’s going to be some bloodshed here. I don’t think all of the underbosses are going to go along with the change in management, but I’d like to keep it to a minimum,” I said.

Misha was checking through scenarios again. He said, “we’re going to have to go to Matin. That’s the only option for him.”

“Not surprising.” I said.

“How do you think Battista is finding out about the deals that Ricardo and Martin me? He must not know about Sal’s deal yet,” Andrei asked.

“I was wondering that, too. I’d be curious to know how he found out about the others Stephen said.

“I’ll find out where he is tomorrow and schedule a meeting for the next time he’s in town if he’s not already,” Viktor said.

Misha quickly looked for Battista. “No need. He’s still here. I think he likes being close to the action,” he said. He was obviously having fun with using his demon to look for anything and everything. I might’ve just created a monster.

Viktor laughed. “You’re handy to have around now, kid. You make my job much faster

It did make me happy to see Viktor so relaxed with all of us once again. Since Stephen had helped him deal with his time in Syria, he was finally himself again. He scarcely had any fear toward our demons, which helped the rest of us be more comfortable around him. It was clear that he was happy with the choice he’d made and as long as that stayed true, I would be happy for him.

After everyone had gone back to their apartments for the evening, Sephie and I were two teenagers, unable to keep our hands off each other. The door to the penthouse had hardly closed and she literally jumped in my arms, wrapping herself an und me as she giggled. I set her on the counter, pulling her clothes off as she feverishly worked to get mine off as well.

“I’ve been waiting for this all day long,” she said breathlessly. My lips barely gave her the chance to say anything. My arms were holding her as close to me as possible. It felt like my need for her was growing the longer we were together. Instead of falling into comfortable routines, getting somewhat bored with each other, we were still at the dating stage where we couldn’t get enough of each other. I could feel her need matched mine, She’d spent much of the evening pushing her warmth to me anytime she caught me looking at her. She caught me looking quite a 6 times….

“What is wrong with us,” I said, smiling against her lips.

She pressed her forehead to mine, looking at me with her deep blue eyes. “I’m not sure, but I hope this one never stops,” she said, her gorgeous smile threatening to stop my heart.

I put my hands on either side of her face, my thumbs rubbing her cheeks gently, and pressed my lips to hers. I felt her completely melt in my arms as Ukissed her sweetly. There was still something so sweet and innovent about her loving my gentle as so much in her own way, she was still challenging my levels of control as feeling hei melt just made me want to completely devour bet each time.

She wrapped her arms around my neck, moaning quietly. Her hips pressed into mine as she wrapped her legs tighter around me. I enjoyed teasing her maybe more
than I should, so I made her wait before I slid inside her. I loved it when she reached the point of demanding me to f*ck her.

I kissed my way down her neck, softly biting all her favorite spots. I could feel everything I was doing to her, which only served to turn me on even more which made it more difficult to control myself. It made it that much sweeter when I finally gave in

I could hear her soft moans turning more into whimpers as she was getting more ingtient. She changed tactics, trying to turn me on so much I wouldn’t be able to deny her any longer. She grabbed one of my hands, guiding it between her legs. She knew as soon as I felt how wet she was, I wouldn’t be able to hold back much. longer. I chuckled, loving the effect I was having on her. She looked at me, her eyes swirling between blue and green. “I both love you and hate you so much right now,” she said as she worked her hips against my hand. I finally gave her some relief, sliding two fingers inside her. She moaned, closing her s. I could feel the warmth from her spread through my body.

I exhaled loudly, knowing I was losing my own battle with my control. “Please,” she whispered in my ear. That was all it took for me to officially lose the battle. I slid inside her slowly as I watched her reaction to me. She moaned loudly, getting lost in the feeling every single time. Her body was nothing but pleasure, which meant my body was nothing but pleasure as she shared everything with me. We were both immediately consumed with the feeling of each other.

I adored watching her eyes swirl through every color as her body surrendered to me. Maintaining eye contact with her had been quite intense for me, as well as her, in the beginning, but now we both loved it. My soul was hers anyway. There wasn’t piece of it that she hadn’t already seen.

She moaned loudly as I pushed even farther into her. Her hips met mine with each theist, amplifying the pleasure we were both feeling. She was beginning to get over her shyness at the guards outside the door being able to hear her, so she wasn’t folding back as much as she used to. It was still music to my ears every time I heard her moan.

Sephie leaned back on her arms, giving me a full view of her breasts as they bounced ith each thrust. She leaned her head back, nearing the point of o*gasm. Just as she was about to crash over the edge, she picked her head up and looked me in the eyes once more. Her eyes never failed to impress me, but this time, instead of swirling, they had landed on red.

It was enough to drive both me and my demon insane. I saw the look of lust on her face; I knew my eyes had turned black. Hers stayed red, however. I increased the intensity, thrusting into her harder each time. She exploded into an o*gasm, every ind of her body tingling. Her loud moans were surely being heard by the guards
outside.

Her arms finally gave way and she leaned all the way back on the counter, keeping her legs wrapped tightly around my waist. It was enough of a change that I hit new spots inside her, causing another new wave of pleasure to course through her. Ikipt a tight hold of her hips, pulling her back to me each time I thrust into her.. trying to keep her *rgasm going as long as possible.

She pushed everything she was feeling to me, making it next to impossible to last very much longer. My body was exploding in pleasure, along with her. Every inch of my body felt like it was on fire, in the best way possible. I finally couldn’t take anymore and found my release just as she was coming down from another *rgasm. She sat up, wrapping her arms around me.

Her lips found mine as we both worked to catch our breath. She kissed me just as sweitly as I had kissed her at the beginning of this. It was exactly what I needed. I opened my eyes to see her eyes had landed on deep blue once again. She smiled when she saw my look of satisfaction.

We stood there, still completely tangled and connected in the kitchen, in silence for a few moments. I was completely lost in how much I loved her. How everything in my life was better because she was in it. How the world looked even brighter with her by my side. I loved her completely.

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Adrik

I enlisted Andrei’s help the next day. I wanted to keep Sephie distracted, but I also wanted her to have time alone with Andrei. We’d talked about it before falling asleep the night before and she had a feeling that Andrei would connect with his demon faster if he did it in private.

“I know he’s nervous about losing control in front of everyone, so I think if I can get him on his own and somewhat control the conditions, if you will, it’ll happen faster, she had said the night before.

It worked out perfectly, as I wanted her to not be around while I talked to everyone else about what to do with the families of the bosses. Dario’s statement about Sal’s kids had brought up an issue I hadn’t thought about in a while: what to do with their families.

“I mean, I hate to just say let’s get rid of all of them, but that would definitely be the easiest route,” Ivan said once they were all in my office, while Sephie and Andrei were upstairs.

“Are they all still in the city?” Stephen asked.

“They all live here, but they’re in and out. Sal’s kids, anyway. Massimo’s kids are elsewhere. Same for Armando’s kids. They all moved away from the city,” Viktor said.

“If they’re in the city, it’ll be easy to find them and approve them, if you will,” Misha said. “But I think we might be able to do the same for all of them, as long as I know what they look like. We should be able to find out if they’re following in dearest Dad’s footsteps.”

Ivan was quietly contemplating everything. He and I had already discussed this when we were talking to Dario the evening before. Neither one of us liked the idea of leaving their families alive to move against us in the future. There is an alternative he said, looking at me. “Once they find out what really happens to Sal, they might never make a move against you. Or make a deal like Sal did. They might take care of themselves for us.”

“I don’t know how much of a chance I want to take. I would like to be done with this once Sal and Ricardo are taken care of. I prefer peace to war,” I said. “Get rid of entire families and nobody is willing to move against me for a very long time.”

“You’re not wrong there,” Ivan said. We all turned to Misha, wanting to see if he could confirm one scenario over the other one. His eyes went just as black as Sephie’s did as he used his demon’s power to help him run through scenarios. His eyebrows furrowed in frustration. He tried a second time, but eventually his eyes switched back to normal.

He looked at me, “I can’t see anything on either of those scenarios. Like literally nothing. It’s all fuzzy. I think I might need Sephie on that one. Maybe Andrei too.”

“Has that ever happened before?” Stephen asked.

Misha shook his head no. “No, even before Sephie started helping me, I could always fond an answer. It might’ve just been a snapshot, but it was always something. This time, I can’t see anything. It’s all blurry.”

“You’re thinking that means something?” I asked Stephen.

“Yeah. I just don’t know what,” he said.

I sighed. It was never easy. I looked to Viktor. “When can Battista meet again?”

“He’s got time tomorrow. So do you,” he said. “He even said he’d come here, to make it easier.”

“That’s new, but I’ll take it,” I said.

As we finished our conversation, İvan looked to Stephen with his sly grin on his face. “How many times did you make your eyes go black after we all left the penthouse last night?”

Stephen laughed. “At least 20. I stood in front of the mirror and watched it for like half an hour. I couldn’t help myself. It’s so disturbing and fascinating at the same time.” Stephen looked at me, adding, “I understand completely why you wanted to keep Sephie’s eyes changing from us initially. It’s such a unique phenomenon. I would’ve wanted to keep a lid on that as long as possible, too.”

“I put in an order for contacts for you three. Andrei’s going to need them soon, too, Ian said, chuckling

“That’s partly why he’s upstairs with Sephie. She thinks she can get him to connect with his demon if it’s just the two of them,” I said.

“Anybody felt his anger yet?” Misha asked. We all shook our heads no. I’d felt nothing from either of them so far.

“He’s worried about losing complete control,” I said. “He’s probably going to fight getting angry enough for it to work.”

“Or she surprises all of us with a new ingenious way to get him to connect without bi getting angry. That wouldn’t surprise me, either,” Ivan said.

Viktor stood up. While he was definitely more comfortable around all of us, the demores still made him a little nervous from time to time. It didn’t surprise me that he used work to get out of this conversation. “I’m going to start looking for all the loss progeny,” he said, smirking as he left the office.

Once he had left, Stephen said, “he’s better than he’s ever been, but the demons still make him a little nervous. He still needs time to get completely comfortable. He’s also basically surrounded by them now. Especially if Andrei figures it out this afternoon.”

“It’s understandable. He’s handling it better than I thought he would,” I said.

As we were talking, we all felt a wave of anger from Sephie. It was very strong and very clear. We all looked at each other, smiling, knowing what was happening
upstairs.

“This is almost the same level she had to get to when yours first changed,” Ivan said Apparently, Andrei had reason to be worried he’d be able to contain it.”

“Our little Andrei is growing up,” Misha said, laughing.

“You can easily tell the difference between our demons now, can’t you?” Stephen asked me.

“Yeah. I would think you’ll be able to do the same soon, too. If you can sense other demons, it would make sense you’d be able to differentiate between ours,” I said. “But don’t hold me to that. I think at this point, nobody is quite sure of just what we’re capable of. Your latest level-up was never mentioned before. You might’ve surprised everyone with it.”

“I’m still working toward crushing demons at some point, not gonna lie,” he said, completely straight-faced.

“I think it’s time we have a conversation about just why you’re looking forward to seeing Vlad again. Feels like you have ulterior motives sometimes, Stephen,” Ivan said, running his hand over his goatee thoughtfully.

It caught Stephen off-guard, making him laugh loudly. “We buried that hatchet hundreds of years ago. Don’t worry,” he said, still laughing.

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Sephie

I knew Adrik wanted to keep me busy. I knew he was trying to decide what to do with the families of all the bosses and I loved him for trying to protect me from that. It did, however, give me a chance to have Andrei to myself. I'd been thinking about how to help him connect with his demon and I was pretty sure I'd come up with a solution for it..

He was nervous that he'd be able to control his anger once he finally let it take over. Andrei was so calm and controlled all the time that he'd only rarely seen the extent of his anger himself. He was so in control of his anger that he always knew the exact amount to let out to get the job done. No more, no less. The idea of having to let it all out at once worried him.

"Bubba, I've been thinking." I said as I was making him help me in the kitchen. I'd told him I was going to make him shortbread that afternoon. At least he had something to look forward to after he discovered my secret plan. Poor kid was a pawn from all directions today.

"Still about red pandas or have you moved on to the quandary of why lions are called the king of the jungle when they live on the savanna and nowhere near a jungle?" he asked.

My mouth fell open. That answer was completely unexpected from Andrei. I just started laughing and couldn't stop for a few minutes. "I love you so much right now, Bubba," I said. He was laughing with me, enjoying a chance to be just the two of us. Out of all of them, Andrei appreciated one-on-one time the most. He loved that I got closer to him first in the beginning. He loved that he got put on heater duty whee Adrik wasn't around. He just liked having a few things that no one else did. It was a confidence boost for him. He was so handsome and so capable, but he still 't see it in himself all the time. He still hadn't figured out that even if we did the same things as the other guys, it was still different because it was him. He was the secret ingredient. They all were. Every experience was different when viewed through their eyes and experienced with them.

"Okay, spider monkey, what have you been thinking about? Besides endangered wild, I mean," he said, still trying to control his laughter.

"I've been thinking about how to get you to connect with your demon. I think it'll be asier for you if it's just the two of us," I said.

He cut his eyes over to me. "Boss isn't the only one that requested me to babysit today

I laughed. "No, he's not. I know why he wants to keep me occupied and I love him for trying to protect me from it. I requested extra time with you when I had the idea of how to get you to connect with your demon."

"I feel like I should be objecting more to being just a pawn, but I can't say I dislike he said, thoughtfully. I giggled.

"Okay, tell me your idea."

"You're worried about losing complete control, right?" He nodded his head in agreement. "What if you take a page from Viktor's book and do it backward?"

"Explain."

"What if I show you first how to control it, instead of waiting for it to happen and then showing you how to control it. I've felt your anger before. I know how controlled you keep it on your own, but I also know you know the exact point you can push it to before you feel that control start to falter. What if I go nuclear first, then show you how it's done?"

He thought for a few moments. "That could work. Boss knows you're doing this, right?)

"No one will come running up here unless it's absolutely necessary. I talked to him last night about it. Honestly, I think you're going to do fine. I think it's more your confidence in your abilities than it is anything else. You're always the last one to believe you can do it. You're so good at instilling confidence in everyone else. That's what makes you such a great trainer. You just suck at listening to your own advice."

He chuckled, but looked at the floor. I didn't need to search to know why he felt that way. "You know your little brother isn't better looking than you, right? I mean, he's not ugly, but he's in no way better than you are in any category. You should stop comparing yourself to him. Can he kill someone with just his thumbs?"

He laughed. "No, definitely not."

"Alright then. What good is he to anyone? S*it hits the fan and he knows what angles are the best ones to get his reaction shot? How is that in any way a useful skill to have?" He smiled at me. His wide, genuine smile that let me know I'd just said the thing he's been needing to hear for years. I kept going. I can't help myself. "You've probably had to hear how handsome he is for years. I mean, he's pretty. He might be prettier than I am, now that I think about it. The thing about relying on your looks is that your looks don't last. What's he got to fall back on when he starts to age? A *hitty personality that he's developed because he's used to getting everything he wants because of his pretty face." I walked to Andrei, who was standing cross the kitchen from me. I slid my arm around his waist, leaning my head on his shoulder. "Some of us are meant to shine very brightly for a very short time. He's one of those. His light is going to go out sooner rather than later. Some of us though, have lights that might not be as bright, but are so strong that they will shine for millennia to come because of the marks wy've left on the world. Your light is changing the world so completely that generations from now will benefit. His is making it pretty for a few more years. Which would you rather have?"

He'd put his massive arm around my shoulders as I was talking. He squeezed me closer to him, kissing the top of my head. "I still don't know how you always know what to say, but please never stop. You didn't even need to look in my head to know all that."

I just held my pinky up to him. He chuckled, grabbing it quickly.

He sighed. "Alright, let's try your idea. Now that we won the bet pool with Stephen, siess it's time I got my act together."

"Okay, so I think all I need to do is go nuclear and you'll be able to see how I control. It's easiest to think of your anger like a living thing. I like to think of mine as fire, because it's always felt hot to me. Fire was the natural choice. Sometimes it's spoke, sometimes fire. Depends on the levels needed. But when you think about it like a real thing, then you can picture it, which helps you control it. Make sense?" said, moving to face him.

"It does make sense. Hit me," he said.

I couldn't help but grin at him as I let my anger levels rise to insanely high levels. I could still feel Adrik now, even with my anger levels this high. I felt his moment of happiness once he felt my anger, knowing he knew what was happening and was it as ready for it as I was. I saw Andrei's moment of surprise when he felt my anger go off the charts. They'd only felt it this high a few times, so it was still surprising to them when it happened.

1 could feel Andrei looking in my head, watching how I controlled it. He was as good of a student as he was a teacher. After a few minutes, I knew he had the basics. enough to be able to try on his own. I also figured out why he was wary of letting his anger levels get that high.

"You'll be able to still control your demon when your anger takes over, Bubba. That's what you're really scared of, isn't it?"

He nodded. "I'm worried it's going to take over."

"Don't think of it as an adversary. You were the one that caught on that mine was trying to help me. Yours is no different. If it wasn't on board with the program, we all would have caught on to that fact by now. Don't think of yours as anything other an a friend. It wants to help you just as much as mine wants to help me."

He inhaled deeply, then started to let his anger take over. Andrei was so happy and y-going all the time that his anger felt almost subdued compared to everyone else. High levels for him would barely register for someone like Ivan. Much like Stephen, Andrei's anger was calculated. It was precise. If it made an appearance, the target was dead before they even knew Andrei was angry. He had closed his eyes to concentrate, but opened them to look at me. Instead of his cappuccino-colored eyes, they were almost black.

My smile told him he had been successful in his attempt.

Okay, maybe me jumping up and down in excitement might've been a clue too.

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Adril

Sephie and Andrei stayed in the penthouse the entire afternoon. The rest of us finally joined them once we were all done for the day. The penthouse smelled of promises of gastro-intestinal bliss when we walked in. My eyes landed on Sephie immidiately. Her smile stretched wide across her face as she freed up her hands to come to me.

“I missed you, “I told her as my lips found hers.

“I missed you more,” she told me, deepening the kiss.

“How did it go with Andrei?” I asked her as I continued to kiss her. I could hear her giggling in her head.

“I think his level of control might be almost as good as mine,” she said, her lips still on mine. 7 like this multi-tasking thing.”

“Me too. Gives me reason to not stop kissing you. I fully support this,” I told her, holding her tighter.

She laughed, placing both hands on either side of my face. “I love you so much,” she said, her wide smile threatening to stop my heart. Even still.

I pressed my lips to hers once more before she turned around to return to dinner. I felt a moment of disappointment as she went to leave. She looked back over her shoulder, grinning at me. She caught my hand, pulling me with her. Of course, she felt it too.

“Have you found out where Battista is yet?” Sephie asked as she looked between Ivat, and Viktor.

“We’re meeting him tomorrow. He’s coming here, in fact,” Ivan said.

“Oh. That’s different,” she said, looking at me, her eyebrows raised. She looked to Andrei, who also looked somewhat surprised. “Do you think he’s going to surprise us with something again?”

“That’s what I was thinking, too,” he said. He thought for a moment, then looked to Vktor. “I think we should have a tune-up before he gets here, if you can manage.”

Viktor nodded in agreement. “I can make sure everyone is protected, but I’m finding that your auras get stronger once you’ve connected to your demons. It’s pretty much exactly the opposite of what I was thinking when it first started happening. So owe everyone an apology. I was convinced it would make you all weaker, but it’s made you all stronger.”

I was surprised that he’d admitted that. We all knew. We’d all forgiven him. He was struggling with everything at the time. It was surprising that he brought it up in front of everyone.

“I know you grew up in a very traditionally religious household. It can be difficult to merge that world with the one you’re currently living in,” Ivan said.

“That’s a lot of what it was. Religion teaches you to avoid evil as completely as you cas. Like somehow not even acknowledging evil exists will magically make you a better person,” Viktor said.

Sephie smiled her sweet smile at him. We all watched him melt as she smiled at him.

think that’s the trick of religion. They want to keep their customers, right? What better way than to convince them a significant portion of each individual is intently wrong and needs forgiveness? I think we know better than most that everyone has both good and evil. It comes down to the choices you make and which aspect of yourself you give attention to.”

“That’s also what helped me see the error of my ways, if you will,” Viktor said. “Watching you help Jessica, someone you didn’t even know, made me realize that the line between good and evil is very wide and very grey. I was trying to make it much more black and white than it actually is.”

She smiled at him again. “You realize we’re doing the same thing with our demons that you did for Kostya, right? It’s not as traumatic, of course, but by them helping us, they’re clearing their Karma.”

He looked at her, his eyes wide. Everyone’s eyes went a little wide, to be honest. None of us had thought about it that way.

“How did you figure that out, Sephi?” Stephen asked.

1/2

“Bubba and Kostya helped me. I was reminded of Kostya saying something similar when I was helping Bubba connect with his demon today. He was worried he was going to be able to control it, but Bubba was the first one to figure out that my demon was trying to save me when all that happened with Ilya. I was trying to convince him that his demon was no different from mine. They all want to help,” Sephie said.

“It’s true. The longer you guys are connected, the more you’ll be able to feel that your demons have their own opinions on things,” I said, I glanced at Sephie, grinning at her. “Sephie’s demon, for example, is just as opinionated as she is. On literally everything.”

They all looked at Sephie, trying to keep a straight face. “I know what you’re all thing. We agree on everything. But I promise to let you all witness it if there’s ever a time where we don’t agree.”

“That’s all we ask,” Misha said, laughing.

“How did it go this afternoon?” Ivan asked Andrei. Sephie was not lying when she sai Andrei’s control might be rivalling hers. He looked at Ivan, switching his eyes to black without even blinking. It made everyone erupt into loud exclamations.

“That’s impressive, Andrei. Sephie told me your control rivalled hers. She was not lying.” I said. He was clearly proud of himself, which made me happy to see. Confidence was always something he struggled with. He had no reason to; he was insanely talented at everything he put his mind to. Watching him grow as he trained Sephie was just as fun as watching Sephie improve under his direction. They were both bringing out the best in each other. I was grateful to witness it.

I watched Andrei, studying him now that he was connected, as he talked and laughed with everyone. “Your demon is quieter than the rest, Andrei.” Both he and Sephie looked at each other, chuckling.

“She said the same thing this afternoon. She said it felt much like my anger. Quiet, but no less deadly,” he said.

“Did you have to go nuclear? None of us felt it. We all felt Sephie, but none of us felt you,” Misha said.

Sephie grinned. “He did go nuclear. His nuclear is just so much more understated than everyone else’s that nobody felt it. You’re all used to mine yelling at you that nobody heard Andrei’s whisper. That’s how he gets you,” she said, laughing at Andrei’s checks turning red.

“Given that you and Sephie share so much in common with your gifts, I think it’s kind of fitting that your demon is somewhat the opposite of hers. Balance seems to be a running theme in all of this,” Stephen said.

“We could say the same for your demon and mine, Stephen,” I said. “Your gift is complimentary to mine, just as theirs are.”

He chuckled. “Honestly hadn’t thought about that, but you’re right.”

“Ivan and Misha kind of *uck up that theory, though,” Andrei said.

“I don’t think either one of them get included in any similarities, to be honest,” Sephie said. “They’re both completely unique. Ivan has his own special assignment and Misha’s gift is so unlike anyone else’s that I think it makes him just as unique as an. They’re similar in their differences,” she said, grinning at both of them.

“And Viktor is there for divine information and protection,” Stephen said.

“I really feel like we should start solving mysteries once this is all over. Maybe get a giant dog too. And a van,” Misha said seriously.

Author’s note: If you’ve stuck with this story for this long, I’d like to thank you again. A few of you have asked about social media. While I generally loathe social media, † recognize it’s usefulness. I we created an Instagram account for now where you guys can reach out and ask questions about the story without giving spoilers away to other readers (which I appreciate nobody likes spoilers). You can find me @ry kane. Fll consider other social media in the future, but nobody hold their breath. Thank you all for reading and loving these characters so much!

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Adrik

Viktor walked in my office, looking quite serious, even for him. “Boss, the DA just called. He’s ready to prosecute Dr. Moretti. They went through the files we gave them from Sal in much more detail than we did. Eric can bring charges against Sal as well.”

I thought for a moment. “I’m not sure I want that happening. If Sal has made his own deal, his fate might already be sealed. I want to talk to Battista to see what he knows about Sal’s deal first.” I inhaled, tapping my fingers on my desk as I thought about how everything needed to happen almost simultaneously and we still didn’t have a solid plan. “Tell Eric he can have Dr. Moretti, but I want to wait on Salf now.”

Ivan had walked in, shortly after Viktor. “Giving him the doctor will buy us just a little bit of time. The information we get on everyone else could look like it came from him, if we play it right,” he said.

“That’s what I was thinking, too. I think we can link Henry to Sal and make it look like the doctor is the one that exposed that connection,” I said. “I’d like to meet with Eric and Doug one more time before we actually hand over the doctor. Are they still being followed by Henry’s people?”

Ivan nodded his head. “I say that loosely. His people are not very good, but they’re still watching both Eric and Doug. There’s several places that we can easily get you to where you can meet with them without anyone seeing.”

“Let’s see what Battista has for us, then set something up to meet with those two in person. If I hand that sack of s*it over to them, I want to know he’s going away for the rest of his life. I don’t want to have to find him again and tie up their loose ends. That’s just going to p*ss me off.”

Sephie walked in right as I said that last sentence. “Nobody wants that. Especially not how that you’re all murdery and s*it on a regular basis,” she said, smiling widely as she walked to me. “Andrei can kill people with his thumbs, you can now kill people with one look.”

I pushed my chair back, opening my arm for her. She was still grinning at me as she leaned down and kissed me sweetly. It never failed to surprise me how much her simple gestures helped me relax and melted the stress away. I pulled her into my lap wrapping my arms around her, suddenly not caring one bit about anything but her.

“I’ll let Eric know. Battista should be here in a few minutes,” Viktor said, looking at watch. “Stephen is already downstairs waiting for him.”

“Thank you, Viktor,” I said, pulling Sephie closer to me. She leaned back against me hugging my arms around her waist. “What have you gotten into this morning?” I asked, my mouth against her ear.

“Not much. Just making plans for world domination with the Wonder Twins. I really feel like this plan might be the one,” she said as seriously as she could manage.

Ivan chuckled. “If it’s you and Misha planning it together, at least we know it’ll be entertaining.”

She pointed at him, saying, “right? Thank you!”

I laughed at her antics, loving the short breaks she always managed to provide to my tay that made everything a little brighter.

“Do you still have a weird feeling about Battista coming today?” I asked her, brushing her hair away from her shoulder let my fingertips brush her neck lightly, loving the sparks I could clearly feel from her as I did.

“I do. I don’t think it’s necessarily bad. I might just be nervous from the last time he requested our services,” she said.

“Did Andrei, Misha, or Stephen get anything else about it?” Ivan asked.

“No, not that I know of. The Wonder Twins are wary, much like me, but it’s nothing specific.” We all heard the elevator doors ding.

“That’s Stephen,” she said.

“You need to teach me how to do that,” Ivan said.

She giggled. “I will gladly teach you how to do that if you agree to spar with me at least once a week for the foreseeable future,”

Ivan had smiled more than I’d ever seen him smile since I met Sephie, but the smile at stretched across his face when she asked him to spar with her more was maybe the largest smile I’d ever seen on that man’s face. I could feel how happy it made him.

“Deal,” he said. I could also feel how happy it made her when he agreed.

“Not gonna lie, I love the fact that my fiancée is giddy over being trained to be a better fighter right now,” I said right before Stephen walked into the office with Battista. Shortly after, the Wonder Twins and Viktor walked in, closing the door behind them.

The mood turned slightly more serious once Battista was in the office. Once he had greeted everyone, we got straight to business. “Battista, how did you find out about Ricardo and Martin’s deals?” I asked.

He sighed. “It’s a complicated answer, but the very basics are that we have a psychic that gets notified by whatever communicates with her when another deal is made.”

“You don’t know what communicates with her?” Sephie asked.

“No, she refuses to reveal how she gets the information,” Battista said.

“How long between when deals are made and when she finds out usually?” I asked..

“I’m not entirely sure. I don’t think I’ve ever asked that question. Why are you asking

“Because Sal made a deal. We don’t know specifics, but it wasn’t that long ago that he did it. I don’t know if he made a deal with a lower-level demon and that’s why it hasn’t come up on your radar or if it’s so new that your psychic hasn’t been alerted yet,” I said.

“Actually, I was going to bring that information to you today. I thought I was going to tell you something you didn’t know. I should’ve known you’d all know already. How did you find out?” he asked.

“Dario said Sal told him about it after it happened, which is somewhat surprising. I don’t know how much these guys are talking about these things among each other, but it seems like something you’d keep to yourself,” I said.

Battista thought for a moment, then said, “maybe this is all coming from Ricardo. Maybe he knows he needs more help than he’s found.”

“Can your psychic find out what kind of demon Sal made his deal with? Ricardo and Martin are going to need to be dealt with differently than everyone else, because of their deals,” I said.

“Differently how?” Battista asked. I knew he was going to want to know the details. asn’t sure I was ready to tell him about my level-up yet.

Thankfully, Stephen is quick on his feet. “Because the demons they made deals with are so powerful, we have to change tactics with them to be effective. It’s going to be much nicer for us to know beforehand if we need to change tactics with Sal as well.”

“We need to take precautions in order to protect ourselves. Knowing beforehand gives us the upper hand, if you will. Which is why we would appreciate notice if you ever need our services for one of your associates again. That was not a fun day for any of us,” Sephie said. Battista could tell by her tone that she was not joking around.

“My apologies, Sephie. I didn’t know the extent of his crimes beforehand. There were plenty of us that had our suspicions, but no one knew for sure until you guys exposed him,” he said.

“I understand. Just let us in on the suspicions next time,” she said. I saw Ivan wink at her, knowing she was trying not to get too irritated thinking about that day and everything she’d seen.

“You have my word that you will know what I know from now on. It never occurred to me that you guys would need to take precautions, but now that I do know, I will make sure you know everything that I do,” he said, apologetically.

I knew we greatly benefited Battista, especially in matters of business, but I also got the impression that he genuinely liked us. He seemed to like my father as well. As much as anyone could like that man. They’d been friends for years, but I never realized the extent of their relationship until recently. My father had been helping out behind the scenes for much longer than I was aware of. It was an intriguing side to Vitaliy that I never would’ve known about, were it not for Sephie.

“What are your plans for taking care of Ricardo and Martin?” Battista asked.

“Honestly? We don’t have any yet,” I said, chuckling at Battista’s shocked expression

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Adrik

We spent several hours talking things through with Battista. There were so many different players involved that it was going to be difficult to formulate a solid plan for all of them at once. We hadn't even brought Martin into the picture yet. Or the Mexican cartels.

"I have it on good authority that Niko and Vito are planning on returning to the city in the next two weeks. We don't have a specific date yet, but the money supply is drying up, so they're coming back to find out what's going on with the underbosses and their inability to collect taxes," Battista said.

Ivan was running his hand over his goatee, as he usually did when he was thinking though a problem. "What if we let them come back to the city to try and collect taxes? The people won't stand for it. What if we let the people take care of Niko and to for us? They're a big reason that the underbosses stopped collecting taxes in the first place. Even with knowing what happened to Massimo and Lorenzo, they still likely would've kept trying to collect taxes if the people hadn't fought back."

"I happen to be very good friends with a very talented arms dealer. He can make sure the people are protected against whatever Niko and Vito decide to try," Battista

said.

1 felt Sephie starting to make the connections at the same time I did. "If the people of the city take care of Niko, Vito, and whatever underbosses object, then the mayor will need to appear like he's being tough on crime to keep the favor of the pete," she said.

"Which will be the perfect opportunity to arrest Dr. Moretti. He can be the reason we connect Sal and Henry," I said.

"Henry connects the switch-hitting representative," Ivan said.

"The mayor and the DA look like they're being very tough on crime and easily get re-elected," Stephen said.

"Not to mention the new wing on the hospital that's happening out of all this," Andre said.

"Okay, so that takes care of everything here quite nicely. What about Ricardo and Sa Sephie asked.

Misha's eyes went wide. "I know why there were two scenarios for taking care of the bisses. Because we're using both of them. Niko and Vito are coming here, which is why I could see that outcome. But we go after Ricardo and Sal and take care of then before they have a chance to return to the city."

Ivan chuckled, pointing to Sephie. "The princess agrees," he said. They all looked at la, smiling. She looked to me, silently asking what color her eyes had decided

"Purple," I said, kissing her cheek.

"Oh. Well, then. Italy is once again in my future, apparently," she said. She looked back at the rest of the guys, asking, "okay, so that takes care of them. Now, what about Martin?"

"I admittedly don't have as much information on Martin as I do on Ricardo and Sal. What about Trino? Does he still have people that are loyal to him down there?"

Battista asked.

"He does. He's been keeping an eye on him since he's been here. He said Martin has dit ties with the Mexican cartels, as well as Sal and Ricardo. Because he never got Giana as payment for whatever was supposed to happen when he came for her, he's cut them off," I said.

"How much does Trino know about what else is going on with all of this?" Battista asked.

"Everything," we all said at once. Battista was surprised by our answer.

"How did he take that?" he asked

"Quite well, actually. He'd already seen a few things. He'd seen my eyes go black, he knew I was able to somehow see things I shouldn't be able to see. He just didn't know it wasn't just me until he got out of Colombia," Seplie said.

"We'd decided already that one stipulation for his new security team was that they were going to have to be okay with everything weird that is happening, since his last security team had a very big problem with Sephie," I said.

"We took two of Armando's guys, the ones that helped us find Seple and Ivan when they were taken, and gave them to Trino. They know everything now too," Stephen said.

"How did they take it?" Battista asked.

"They're mostly okay with it. I think more shocked than anything." I said. I glanced at Andrei, Misha, and Stephen, before looking back at Battista. "It doesn't hurt that we all control our demons now," I said. I knew right away that my eyes had switched to black, without needing to see anyone else. I could feel it switch now. I could feel Sephie's switch now. I knew if ours did, theirs would too.

Battista looked around the room, somewhat shocked to see so many pairs of black eyes staring back at him. He completely missed that Viktor's eyes were still normal, which saved us from having that conversation with him. "When did this happen?" Battista asked.

"Recently. It didn't happen all at once. They've all figured it out in their own time," Sephie said.

"I was impressed when I first saw it on you, Sephie. I never would've thought I would fee it on so many others. You know this is virtually unheard of, right?" he said.

She nodded her head. "You were right in that it's a warning to other demons, but what you don't know is that our demons are helping us. We're basically using their powers for good now."

Battista looked at her for a few moments. "You're actually using your demon's powers?

She nodded once more. "Each of our demons compliment us. Mine is very similar to me, for example. It's like an added boost for our gifts, basically."

"Completely unheard of," he said.

"That's because you're looking at things in only black and white. Good and evil aren't black and white. There's a very large grey area that is more accurate, Sephie said. "It's hard to imagine that a demon would want to help, but you have to remember they haven't always been demons. They were souls like us at one time. They just made bad choices and paid more attention to the evil than good. You can't have one over the other all the time. Even only focusing on the good will get you in trouble. You can't ignore that evil exists and expect it not to affect you or those around you," Sephie said.

Battista was quiet for a few moments. He finally looked at her and said, "light cannot exist without darkness, nor can darkness exist without light. The existence of one implies the existence of the other. This is something that people have known for centuries, but it has been altered and pe*verted by different religions to the point that people don't understand the synergistic relationship between the two any longer."

Sephie

We talked with Battista for a few hours more, but we still struggled to come up with a plan for Martin. We didn't have quite as many details on him and the Mexican cartels were a definite wild card in everything. We were going to need more informatie on them as well before coming up with a plan on how to handle that situation.

Once Battista left, the mood in the room was noticeably lighter. Everyone seemed relived to finally have some kind of plan. It had felt like we were stumbling around in the dark for weeks now, trying to decide what to do.

On the elevator to the penthouse, I asked, "how likely do you think it will be that Martin will get word of what's happening in the city and will run or try something else?"

"Is he smart enough to run though?" Ivan asked.

I laughed. "I think that's fair, but I'm also not totally sure what you mean. For once.)

Ivan waited until we were all inside the penthouse, in the kitchen, to explain furthe everyone basically working with him because they likely don't have any other choice, he's probably thinking he's untouchable already."

have a feeling that Martin thinks he's won already. With Trino gone and

Stephen added, "that could work to our advantage. If we keep Trino here and stay completely away from Colombia until after Ricardo and Sal are taken care of, he's very likely to get comfortable and think he's safe down there. That's good for us."

"I think we need to talk more with Trino. We need more details about what's going on down there before we come up with a definite plan for him," Adrik said.

"You're going to bring the mayor and the DA in on the plan for everyone else?" I askel Adrik.

"Yes. I would like to meet with them once more before turning Dr. Moretti over to them. I want to be sure about them before I hand him over."

"Oh, he's the loose end you don't want to have to tie up for them," I said, remembering his earlier statement about being p*ssed off. He smirked at me, walking to me. We still couldn't stand for there to be any unnecessary distance between us. Even my demon would calm down when he was touching me. She wasn't rowdy when we were apart, but there was an increase in my level of anxiety until I was with him again.

"We need to meet with the leaders of the 'resistance movement' in the city again and let them know what's happening. If they know it's coming, they can be better prepared," Ivan said.

"And apparently armed to the teeth thanks to Battista and his strange connections," I said. "Nobody will be sad about that little detail."

Ivan looked at Viktor and Adrik both. "I do wonder just who this arms dealer is that his friends with. My money is on Boris," he said.

Adrik chuckled. "I almost asked if it was him when he brought it up. I think we should ask to meet him."

"Who's Boris?" I asked.

"He's an old friend of Vitaliy's. He's been running arms around the world my entire life. War is his profit. That being said, he's not a totally bad guy. He always makes sure to supply both sides of every conflict," Adrik said, unable to hide his smile.

I couldn't help but laugh too. "Grey area," I said.

That evening. Vitality and all his men were coming over for dinner. When he took Aroundo's house, I made him promise that he would still come for dinner regularly while he was in the city. He made good on his promise. He would come over at least once a week to have dinner with us. Sometimes he would come with just Aleksei and other times, he would bring everyone.

Tonight was a special treat because Ilya brought Jessica with him, much to everyone's surprise.

When everyone walked in, Vitaliy raught me and pulled me slightly away from everyone. "Ilya told me everything about her. She's not as strong as the rest of you, but she's much like all of you when I touched her. She's still very much a scared little girl, however. Ilya has been good for her so far. She's been good for him, too, He seems happier. He asked if he coun! bring her so she could see you again. He told me she asks about you often. Forgive me for not telling you. I hope you don't mind, sladkaya, but I think it would be good for her to spend time around you," he said.

"You should know by now that I've perfected the art of feeding a small army. Even if she eats like me, there will be plenty. I'm actually really happy to see that things are working out between them," I said, watching Ilya with her over Vitaliy's shoulder. He was affectionate with her and clearly protective of her. Not that he had anything to worry about with us, but men tend to become protective of the women they're developing feelings for. Most of the time, without even realizing it's happening. It was, in fact, adorable to witness.

I hugged Vitaliy's neck, feeling him relax as he held on to me. "I've missed you, old in," I said, grabbing his hand and walking further into the kitchen.

"You feel different than the last time I saw you, sladkaya," he said in Russian. Clearly essica knew some things, but not other things just yet.

"You should shake your son's hand, Vitaliy. He's the reason I feel different," I said, greining at him. His eyes went wide, but his curiosity got the better of him. He walked immediately to Adrik, who offered him his hand. He was smirking at Vitaliy, Charly already enjoying the reaction we were all expecting.

Vitaliy cursed when he took Adrik's hand. "You… But… How?" he finally managed to get out.

Adrik chuckled. "It's quite a long story. I don't want to be rude in front of our newest guest, so we'll get into it later," he said, still in Russian.

"Come. Let's eat first," I said. I might've snooped in her head, but I knew Jessica was starving. I gingerly grabbed her free hand that Ilya wasn't holding and pulled her toward the food. "Your stomach is going to drown out the conversation, so let's give it something to do," I said, winking at her. Her cheeks went red and she looked like she wanted to hide. "Don't worry, mine can wake the dead when I'm that hungry. Ask any of the guys. They've all heard it," I said, laughing.

"Even I know about her stomach, ptichka," Ilya said to Jessica. "Vitya told me about it many times."

"See? It's legendary," I said. As Jessica got her food, I leaned closer to Ilya, telling him in Russian, "um, the fact that you call her your little bird might be the cutest thing I've ever seen." His cheeks turned bright red. I just winked at him and walked back to Adrik.

I tucked myself into his side. He was smiling as he asked me, "what did you say to hit to make his face turn so red?"

"He calls her ptichka. I told him it might be the cutest thing I've ever seen."

Adrik pulled me closer. I could feel a twinge of resentment. "Not cuter than me calling you solnishko."

It was so hard not to laugh, but I somehow managed. He was actually jealous and maybe a little worried that Ilya's pet name for Jessica was better than him calling me solnishko. "That's because you calling me solnishko is not cute."I felt the resentment quickly turning to anger, so I stepped in front of him, placing my hands on either side of his face. "It's divinely enchanting, "I told him, loving the switch between is anger and the smile that stretched across his face. I stood on my toes and pressed my lips to his as I told him, "I would much rather be your sun. We both know not delicate enough to be a bird anyway." I ended up finally losing the struggle to not laugh and I giggled against his lips.

"I wouldn't have it any other way," he told me as he wrapped his arms completely around me, holding me tightly..

After dinner, I caught Ilya and Jessica slightly away from everyone else. The rest of the guys were deep in discussion, switching between Russian and English, which meant Jessica couldn't really understand most of what was being said. "How are you Iya? No more issues?" I asked him in English, hoping he would understand my question.

"None. I've been quite good. I really like working for Vitaliy. Aleksei has helped me tremendously. I feel like I'm really catching up in my training," he said, proud of his progress.

"Yeah? We should train together again soon. I would love to see it," I said. I looked down at Jessica. "And how are things with you? You definitely look much better than the last time we met," I said, smiling at her.

She grinned at me. Her grey eyes lit up as she looked up at Ilya. "Much better, I can't thank you enough for helping me that night. I'm very happy it happened, as ! never would've met Ilya otherwise, but I would like to never be in that situation again

"I can't say I blame you there. How long have you been able to see these things?" I asked her, curious about her ability to see angels.

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Sephie

“As long as I can remember. My parents think I’m crazy. My grandmother thought I special and would argue with my parents all the time in my defense, but she died several years ago,” she said, looking down at the floor.

“You still see her though, don’t you?“

Her eyes got wide and her cute little smile stretched across her face. “I do. I see her the time. She follows me around most of the time. That night at the fundraiser was the first time I’d seen other angels in the same place at the same time usually only see one at a time. I was excited about it, but then everyone thought I was crazy.” Her bright face darkened as she thought about that night. “I’m not sure what would’ve happened if Ilya hadn’t heard the commotion from the kitchen.”

I glanced at Ilya, who was watching her. He wrapped his arm around her, pulling her closer to him. “I have a feeling Ilya had been watching you for longer than you realize.” I said, winking at him.

She looked up at me, surprised. She then looked at Ilya, who clearly had a guilty look on his face. “It’s true,” he said. “I had seen you earlier in the evening and kept an eye on you the whole night. When you didn’t come out of the kitchen, I might’ve walked over to find out what was going on. That’s when I saw what was happening and went to get help.”

“You were watching me? Really?” she asked.

“I mean, not in the stalker kinda way. I was trying to see if I could catch your eye, but you kept your head down almost the entire time,” he said, smiling at her.

“I don’t like attention from strangers,” she said quietly, glancing down at the floor.

“I don’t either. It’s why I surround myself with giant men. They keep me hidden.” I said.

She grinned at me, her cute face once again brighter. “That’s one of my favorite thing about Ilya.” His wide smile stretched across his face at her admission. It was official. They were adorable together. It was easy to see they both cared about each other very much, even after only a short time.

I was watching them with each other for a moment when she looked at me very seriously. I chuckled. “You can ask whatever you’d like, Jessica,” I said.

“How did you know I wanted to ask you something?” she asked me, her eyes wide.

“It was written all over your face. What would you like to know?”

“You’re…different from the last time I saw you. You look different to me,” she said, shyly.

“You’re right. I am different. Can you tell me how I look different to you?” I asked.

She looked around nervously, then took a step closer to me. “You have…wings,” she said. She was so cute, it was difficult not to laugh at her. I didn’t want to tell her Andrei had already shown us what she could see the last time we saw her. “They’re different colors now.”

“What colors are they now?”

“When I saw you last time, they were only white. Now, they fade to black toward the ends,” she said. She glanced over her shoulder, looking at Adrik. “His are almost all black now.” She looked at Ivan next. “His are like yours, but they have red tips. I don’t know what it means, but every other angel I’ve ever seen has only had white wings. I don’t know why you’re all different.”

“Can you see anything on those three men?” I asked her, pointing to the Wander Twar and Stephen. They were on the other side of the kitchen from Ivan and Adrik, so I don’t think she was paying attention to them before.

Stae studied all three of them for a few moments “They’re like you were last time I say you, but it’s harder to see. It’s not as visible to me. I didn’t see that last time. Are they different too?”

“Yes, they are. We’re all different from the last time you saw us,” I said. I couldn’t help but smile at her. She was trying so hard to be bave, but it was somewhat overwhelming for her. I could feel her calm down every time Ilya touched her. It was very sweet to witness.

“What happened?” Ilya asked.

“That’s a bit of a long story. I’m not sure how much we should share right now, but it’s all necessary for what’s coming,” I said in English. I switched to Russian and added, “everyone but your brother can now make their eyes go black. I have a new col too. I’m not sure how much she can handle right away, so let’s take baby steps for now. She’s a very sweet girl, but she’s clearly overwhelmed.”

Ilya nodded in agreement. He kept the conversation going in Russian as he added, “he is overwhelmed. She’s trying to understand everything. I told her a little bit about what happened to me. She’s fighting against wanting to believe it and believing her parents’ assessment that she’s crazy. She wants to believe everything, but she’s been told she’s crazy for long enough that she won’t let herself believe it.”

My heart hurt hearing that she was struggling that much. I looked at him, his arm still protectively around her. “Ilya, you’re good for her. She’s good for you, too. I can see it clearly. Hell, even Vitaliy can see it. He told me when you guys first got here We can try and help her out as much as we can with accepting that she’s different. She’s even different from all of us. Keep telling her that it’s okay she’s different and that you believe her. It’ll take time, but you can help her turn it around.”

“I tell her often, but I will tell her more,” he said, looking down at her smiling sweetly at her. They were all kinds of adorable. I just wanted to squeeze both of them.

She was somewhat nervous that she couldn’t understand what we were saying. “Don’t worry, Jessica. We were talking about how absolutely adorable you are. I don’t know how you’ve managed to do it, but he’s already wrapped around your finger,” 1, smiling at her shock.

Adrik walked over, sliding his arm around my waist. Jessica looked up at Ilya, still shocked at what I’d just told her, but she kept her mouth shut now that Adrik was there. I could feel she was intimidated by him. It was a common reaction to him, even before his latest level-up. Now, it was much more pronounced. He was aware of it, but he rarely tried to make anyone feel more comfortable. With Jessica, however, he did make an attempt.

He smiled at her, saying, “you look much happier than the last time I saw you.”

She smiled nervously, which made Ilya laugh quietly. “She is much happier,” he said fer her.

She inhaled deeply, held her breath for a moment, then said, “I want to thank you again. I didn’t realize how much money you handed me until I got home that night. I’m very grateful.”

Adrik chuckled. “I’m glad it could help you out.”

“She tried to get me to give part of it back to you. I wouldn’t do it,” Ilya said. He looked down at her as her face hardened as she looked up at him. “It was our first fight,” he said, still completely amused by all of it.

I couldn’t help but laugh. I knew Adrik didn’t even know how much money he’d handel her. It didn’t matter.

“I don’t make that much in three months!” she said, still somewhat irritated that ly wouldn’t give part of it back. “I didn’t know it was that much money or I wouldn’t have accepted it!”

“Please, Jessica. Accept it. Keep it. Do not feel guilty for it. You needed to not have to worry about leaving that situation,” Adrik said. Ilya gave her a very clear “I told you so look.

I laughed quietly. “He looks quite intimidating, but he’s one of the nicest men you’ll ever meet,” I said, leaning my head on Adrik’s shoulder. He pulled me closer to him

“Just don’t tell anyone. I don’t want that getting out,” he said, kissing my forehead.

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Sephle

As the evening was winding down, Viktor caught me and Adrik to the side of everyone asking, “would you mind if I spent some extra time with Ilya once Vitaliy leaves for the evening? I haven’t seen him in a few weeks. I also haven’t gotten a chance to really meet Jessica yet.”

“Of course, Viktor. You know you’re free to do as you wish once I’m done for the day. Adrik said.

Viktor looked at me, grinning slightly. “I didn’t want you to think I was avoiding anything,” he said.

“I don’t think that, Viktor. Anymore,” I said, mirroring his grin. “I think you should spend time with Jessica. She’s pretty adorable. I also think you can be good for her, as well. I think you have an inside track to help her understand her gift. She’s sightly overwhelmed. She also knows that we’re different, but she doesn’t know why yet. I didn’t want to hit her with everything yet.”

He nodded. “I have talked to Ilya once or twice since they’ve been spending more time together. He said almost the same thing. He thinks I can help her.”

“He takes after his older brother with his level of intelligence,” I said, winking at him.

After Viktor had walked away, I told Adrik, “even your father likes her. It was like the first thing he told me when they got here. She’s already got Ilya wrapped around her finger.”

Adrik pulled me in front of him, wrapping his arms around my waist. “I can’t imagine what that would be like,” he said, as he pressed his lips to mine. “I would never let that happen.”

Llaughed, hugging his neck tighter. He pressed his cheek lightly to mine, rubbing his facial hair against my cheek lightly the way I loved. He whispered, “I love you, Sephie. So very much.”

“I love you. And your giant heart,” I said, hugging him tighter,

After Vitaliy left with everyone but Ilya, he and Jessica stayed in the penthouse for aw more minutes. They eventually left with Viktor to spend some quality time together.

Andrei glanced at me after they left the penthouse. “Did you see?” he asked.

“I did. I’m guessing you did as well?” I asked.

“Yup. I might’ve overheard you ask how you looked different. That’s when I looked,” said, his handsome smile stretched across his face.

“Are you two going to let the rest of us in on what the hell you’re talking about?” Ivan asked.

“Jessica said I looked different to her this time. You all do too. I asked her to explain how. As she did, I snooped to see what she sees. It’s pretty dang impressive, if I do say so myself.” I said. I quickly shared what she could see when she looked at all us. Before, she only saw our wings from the perspective of us being able to walk through Heaven. Our wings were white, but they had a different look from other angels she’d seen, so she knew there was something about us that wasn’t like other angels. This time, she could see the black in our wings. It made me wonder if she’d soon be able to see demons the same way she sees angels or if her gift was just getting clearer for her.

“Boss and Ivan are clearly in a competition over who has the cooler wings,” Misha said as he looked at what Jessica could see, I chuckled. “I’m surprised Vitaliy left without finding out why we’re all different.”

“I fully expect him to be back tomorrow because of that,” Adrik said.

“How was Jessica? Did you tell her why we all look different now?” Stephen asked. I could feel him slightly worried about a new woman. Out of everyone, he had every reason to be. I went to him, sliding my arm around his waist and resting my head on his shoulder as he put his arm around my shoulders.

“She’s still overwhelmed with everything, so I didn’t get into specifics. I think Viktor can be good for her. Ilya is definitely good for her. She’s a very sweet girl. I think she’ll be fine with everything eventually. She’s still struggling with accepting her own gift, I didn’t want to scare her, so she just knows we’re different for now, but she doesn’t know why,” I said. Silently, I said to Stephen, “I looked in her head. She doesn’t have a mean bone in her body. I know you’re going to anyway, but you don’t need to keep your distance as you wait for her to get mean. Besides, you have me as your attack dog if she proves me wrong”

He didn’t respond, he just squeezed my shoulders a little tighter.

“I might’ve checked on Trino’s girlfriend too. I don’t know, I got nervous when Andrei said she was Mexican and her uncle was killed when Trino took over,” Misha said, looking a little sheepish.

“What did you find?” Ivan asked.

“She’s good from what I could see. Uh, we’re also going to their wedding once everything calms down. So, yeah. That’s a thing that’s happening.” Misha said.

I laughed. “Now that you know you can use your demon to help you, are you spying bit more people?”

“NO!” he said, acting indignant that I would even think that.

Ivan caught my eye. We looked at each other and then back at Misha. “Who else?” we both said at the same time.

“Okay, maybe just a couple people. I was having trouble sleeping. I was bored. It’s net regular thing,” Misha said, slightly embarrassed.

“Who?!” we all demanded at once.

“I might’ve checked on Giana,” he said quietly.

“And?” I asked.

“She’s doing well. Her and her friend moved recently to Portugal. They’re planning on staying there through this next year, then they have plans to move again. Giana has a job, she met a guy, her friend is trying to talk her into going back to school. She’s living the most normal life ever and she seems really happy about that,” he said.

I just couldn’t help the tears that fell as I was completely overcome with relief and happiness that she was doing well. I still didn’t want to be friends with her, but that didn’t mean I didn’t want the best for her.

“Misha, I’m really glad you spied on her,” I said, wiping the tears from my eyes. “It makes me really happy to know that she’s doing okay.”

“I think we’re all relieved to know she’s okay. I don’t think any of us want to be BFFS with her, but she still didn’t deserve to be treated that way,” Ivan said.

“You took the words out of my mouth, Squish,” I said.

“Who else did you spy on?” Andrei asked. “I know that’s not the only one.”

Misha laughed. “Right again,” he said in between laughs. “I might’ve also tried to first Vanessa to see what she’s up to now, that Massimo is dead.” More laughter. “I don’t know how, but I could smell her when I found her.”

We all laughed. “I hope you didn’t watch her for very long. That smell will get on you I said.

“What is our dearest Vanessa doing now?” Ivan asked.

“She’s trying to find a replacement for Massimo, but she’s not having much luck. She’s working at a club somewhere in the city. She gets lots of male attention. Lots,” Misha said, his eyes wide.

“I don’t want to know any more. Please stop talking,” I said, making everyone laugh,

“Come here,” Adrik said silently to me. I squeezed Stephen once more, then walked across the kitchen to Adrik. He wrapped his arms around my waist, holding me tightly. “Close your eyes, Andrei,” he said before he kissed me passionately. Everyone else laughed.

“I am never going to live that one down,” Andrei said. I turned and leaned my back against Adrik’s warm chest, pulling his arms tight around me.

“I mean, it’s never gonna not be funny, Bubba,” I said, laughing.

“We still need to figure out why you got blocked that one time and couldn’t see anything.” Stephen said to Misha, somewhat cryptically.

“You got blocked, Misha? When did that happen?” I asked. I felt Adrik tense slightly and I instantly knew what he was looking for. I squeezed his arms tighter and
chuckled. “I know what you were all discussing. I love you all very much for trying to protect me from that conversation.”

Adrik leaned down and kissed my cheek, saying quietly, “Misha was looking for outcomes pertaining to the families. He could see nothing.

“Has that ever happened before, Misha?” I asked. I didn’t have a bad feeling about this but it was definitely a new occurrence that we’d never experienced before.

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Sephir

“No, it’s never happened before. I’ve always been able to find an answer, but everything was fuzzy that time. It’s been getting clearer for me every other time, too,” he said. He was clearly perplexed.

“Have you tried to look for that same answer again?” Stephen asked.

“Yeah, same result each time,” Misha said.

My mind was racing. I unwrapped Adrik’s arms from around me so I could walk to the remaining cookies I’d made for Andrei. They all smirked at me, knowing I had a serious sweet tooth if something was bothering me. “What? Sugar helps me think, I said, biting into the cookie.

“They need frosting next time,” Misha said. “They’re just boring without it.”

“Noted, my adorable Russian guardian,” I said. As I finished the cookie, I had an idea pop in my head. “Were you looking for Sal’s kids specifically?” I asked. Misha nodded his head. “What if the outcomes on them aren’t clear because no one knows what will happen to Sal yet? Like we don’t know if Stephen will be needed or if Adrik will be needed. Make sense?”

“That falls in line with what Misha was looking for, actually. We said there was a possibility they would never move against us if they find out what really happens to Sal.” Ivan said.

I felt Adrik getting itchy because I was no longer next to him, so as I walked back to his side, I said, “there’s also the possibility that no one knows what will happen when Adrik is needed.”

Everyone was quiet as I settled into Adrik’s arms once more, loving the contentment 1 could feel from him once he had his arms around me again. “Do you think Kostya can find that answer?” Ivan asked.

“We can ask him. Lena might be able to find out too. Those two are the most accessible, if you will,” I said. “I’m not entirely sure anyone like us has ever existed before, though. There may not be answers to be found.”

Andrei yawned as everyone mulled over what had been said. “We can worry about it all tomorrow. I think everyone should get some sleep tonight,” Adrik said. Sleep was definitely the last thing on his mind right now, but it sounded reasonable enough to everyone else.

As soon as the door closed behind them, Adrik’s lips were on mine. He was desperate for me, like he hadn’t seen me in months. “What is wrong with me,” he said against my lips. “I cannot get enough of you right now.”

“Please never do,” I said, pulling him with me toward the bedroom. I didn’t think the uards outside the door needed another performance tonight. I would prefer if no one heard me this time.

By the time we made it to the bedroom, we were both completely naked. A trail of clothes remained between the kitchen and the bedroom, waiting to show us the way out should we need it at any point. We were both giggling at our inability to control ourselves.

His hands were everywhere at once, making sure there was as little distance between as possible. His desire felt different. It was almost primal. I broke the kiss long enough that I could look at him. His eyes were swirling between his usual blue and black.

I smiled at him, switching my eyes to black. It was all he needed to stop the internal struggle he was having. He smirked at me as he roughly grabbed me, picking me up. When he got closer to the bed, he all but threw me on it. Flying through the air is now a surprising turn on for me,

He usually struggled to maintain control and would force himself to go slow, at least in the beginning. He still worried he would hurt me most of the time. Tonight was not that way. He flipped me onto my stomach and pulled my hips toward him. He was inside me and I was moaning before I even knew what had happened.

He was rough, but I loved it. I could feel his fingers digging into my hips as he held me tightly. The scar from the night of the ball was usually numb, but when he held my hips, I could feel his fingertips pressing into my skin. As strange as it sounded, it was nice to have something to feel there.

He was pounding into me, his rhythm unrelenting. I was beginning to question if I’d be able to walk the next day, but I wanted him to keep going. All I could do was grab the sheets and hang on as he showed no signs of stopping.

I felt his hand move up my back. Same as my hip, I didn’t normally have much feeling over my back because of my scars. He discovered that if he ran his fingertips over my scars, 1 could feel it. He was apologetic when he first did it. He thought I was sleeping when it happened. He didn’t want to make me uncomfortable by exploring my scars. I surprised him by telling him I really liked it as he gave me something to feel there, other than extreme pain, since it had happened.

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With his hand on my back now, I could feel everything like normal. Like there were no scars. His hand left a trail of fire over my back and I loved it. I wanted more. “Your hand. Use the other one too,” I told him. Thank *od for being able to talk to hire silently. There was no way I’d have been able to get that out in between screams otherwise.

He moved both hands to my back, letting them roam while he pulled me back to him with each thrust. It started an entirely new wave of pleasure through my body. I was completely on fire under his touch. I could feel everything on my back like it wasn’t completely scarred. My body completely exploded. I was no longer in control. He was in complete control of my body, forcing it to ever higher levels of pleasure with each touch, with each thrust of his hips. He owned me in those
moments.

Adrik could feel what I felt. Even through my pleasure, I could feel his gratification at being able to push me to new heights. He always took pleasuring me as a challenge. Like he was trying to beat his personal best each and every time. I fully supported it.

He didn’t let up, he just kept pushing my body to feel more pleasure with each time he pushed into me. It felt like I could do nothing but or*asm. There was no ending, there was no beginning. There was just pleasure.

I finally felt him find his own release and he collapsed onto the bed beside me. I had to work to catch my breath for the first time in a long time as I rolled over next to him. He immediately began to worry when he noticed. His eyes were still black, which somehow managed to calm me. I just focused on his eyes, finding peace in the fact that he would destroy anything and everything that ever thought to cause me harm. I couldn’t help but smile at him as my breathing finally returned to normal once again.

“That hasn’t happened in a while,” he said, concern very evident on his face.

“Um, se* like that hasn’t happened ever. I don’t know why you’re surprised I couldn’t catch my breath,” I said, grinning at him.

He chuckled. “Maybe you’re right.”

I got up, pulling him up with me. He reached down and picked me up, walking us both to the shower.

“I might’ve made it difficult for you to walk,” he said, a boyish grin on his face.

“You definitely did, but I loved every minute of it.”

As we stood under the hot water, he was watching me. “What happened when I put my hand on your back?”

“Mmm, you brought all the feeling back. It felt almost like I didn’t have scars. Same for the scar on my hip. I have feeling there when you grab my hips.”

He smirked down at me. “Well, then I’ll have to grab you more,” he said, holding me against him tighter..

“Please do. I’m a fan,” I said, giggling at the look of surprise on his face.

He leaned down and kissed me. “You never cease to amaze me with how perfect you are for me.”

“It’s like we were meant to be or something,” I said, grinning at him.

His face turned serious as he looked down at me, brushing a curl from my face. “Sephie, I’ve never been more sure that I can get through anything life throws at me now that I have you by my side. All of this…s*it that’s happening with the other bosses? It doesn’t worry me in the slightest. I find myself enjoying the process, simply because you’re with me. I know you will always be there to make my path in life even brighter with your light.”

My breath caught. I looked up at him, my fingers lightly running over his facial hair I felt the pull in my chest from him so strongly. A smile slowly stretched over my face as I looked at him, thinking about how completely I loved him. I felt the same as he did. I knew I could get through anything as long as I had him. I stood up and kissed him sweetly, then rested my head on his chest as his arms completely enveloped me. He sighed as I pushed all my warmth to him, his body completely relaxed and content to have me in his arms.

502

Adrik

Sephie was still sound asleep and very much tangled up with me when I woke the next morning. I went to move and she latched on tighter, without waking up. Apparently, she wanted me to stay for a while longer. Who was I to deny her?

I fully expected her to stay asleep, but she eventually started to stir as I held her, thinking about everything that was going on lately. I felt guilty, as it was likely my emotions that were all over the place that woke her up.

She opened her eyes, smiling sweetly at me. I had to admit to adoring seeing her eyes turn blue first thing in the morning. She hid her face in my chest, pulling me closer to her if that was even possible.

After a few quiet moments, she finally inhaled and went to stretch. She winced when she did.

“Yeah, that’s my fault,” I said, trying to look apologetic and not show how proud I was of it.

She giggled. “You can be proud. I enjoyed it immensely,” she said. “But you might ht to carry me everywhere today.”

I got out of bed, pulling her into my arms. “I like this idea. If I keep you so sore you can’t walk, then you’ll have to go everywhere with me and you can’t get away.” I said, walking her to the bathroom.

She cut her eyes over at me, but didn’t say anything for a moment like she was legitimately considering this option in her life. It made me laugh. “I adore you for even pretending to consider this,” I said, kissing her as I set her down.

“What? It’s a good plan,” she said. I kissed her one more time, then went to the closet, I was still laughing when she finally joined me in the closet. She was still completely naked from the night before, giving me plenty to think about the rest of the day. She caught me looking at her, but I tried to cover.

“You’re still excited that Ivan agreed to spar with you more often,” I said.

“You’re still excited that I’m still not wearing any clothes,” she said, smiling at me.’re both correct.”

G*d, I love her.

Vitaliy surprised us all by showing up with his men in the gym when we went down. We had just arrived in the gym and they walked in.

“Did you plan this last night and I missed it?” Sephie asked me.

“Nope. I told you he’d be back to get an explanation of why we feel different,” I said, laughing. I could hear her laughing in her head.

“To what do we owe this pleasure, Vitaliy?” Sephie asked as she walked over to him to give him a hug.

“Ivan said you two were going to spar this morning. I didn’t want to miss it,” he said, smiling at her. “My guys could use new partners, as well. Ilya wants to see how his progress is coming, too.”

Sephie had told me the night before that Ilya was happy working for my father. She’d shown me what his face looked like as he was talking to her about it catliet in the evening. It was evident that he was very excited with his new situation. It was good to see.

Ivan walked over to Sephie, throwing his arm over her shoulders. “Who do you think should spar with Ilya this time, princess?”

“I get to decide? Why do I get to decide?” she asked.

“You made such a good match last time that it got him a job. You might get ham a promotion this time. Choose wisely,” he said, teasing her.

She elbowed him in the ribs, but she said, “I think it should be Bubba this time.” She looked between me and Ivan, saying, “I think they both want to prove how much they’ve improved. It be a very good match.”

*Should we warn Vitaliy he’s going to want to promote him now or should we just let him figure it out?” Ivan asked.

She giggled, then called Andrei over to make sure he would want to spar with liya. He just smiled widely at her when she asked him. She knew all of us so well by this point that she didn’t need to snoop in anyone’s head. She just knew.

Andrei pulled her to the side while Sergei and Misha got in the ring. As her trainer, he took everything she did very seriously. I think it made him nervous when she sparted with Ivan. He knew Ivan wasn’t going to hurt her, but Ivan also had more training than everyone but me. Sometimes reflexes can be detrimental in such situations. He was trying to keep her from hurting herself, so he made sure she was warmed up and limber before she got in the ring with Ivan.

İvan caught me watching them. “I think I make Andrei nervous when I spar with the princess,” he said, chuckling,

“I was just thinking that. He takes his job as her trainer very seriously. I do appreciate it, not gonna lie,” I said.

“it used to worry me, too. I had to hold back so much with her in the beginning, but the last time I was in the ring with her, I was surprised at how much she’s progressed.”

“She’s been excited about this ever since you agreed to it. I have to admit to being quite curious to see if there’s a difference since my last level-up gave her so much
extra too.”

“S*it. I didn’t even think about that. I better stretch too,” he said, walking over to join Andrei and Sephie.

Vitaliy took advantage of me standing alone. He walked up, asking quietly, “how do you feel so different to me now?”

I laughed quietly. “I got a new level unlocked.” I glanced toward Sephie, who was still warming up. “It’s actually a much better effect if Sephie is here when I tell you the specifics of it.”

“I need your demon eyes, for added emphasis. It’ll only take a moment,” I said to her. She was standing next to me a few seconds later. Vitaliy looked surprised to see her appear without me saying anything..

He snapped his fingers. “I forget you can do that now.”

“It’s quite useful,” I said. I glanced at Sephie, then looked back at my father. “I can no condemn souls and demons to Hell,” I said, flatly.

Sephie slid her arm through mine, as she said, “he’s the King of the Underworld now

Vitaliy’s eyes went wide as he looked at her eyes. She glanced at me, knowing I enjoyed the red almost as much as the blue, then looked back at Vitaliy

“What does this color mean, sladkaya?”

“It’s not so much a meaning as it is homage to the King,” she said. “This one isn’t actually me doing it. It’s my demon. Turns out she loves him just as much as I
do.”

Vitaliy cursed under his breath. “If I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes and felt it with my own hands, I wouldn’t believe it. Why did this happen? Who do you need to
use it on?”

“Ricardo and Martin, specifically. Maybe Sal too, we’re still waiting to see, but he’s recently made a deal as well. Ricardo and Martin are confirmed.”

He ran his hand through his hair. “We apparently have much to discuss.” He looked at Sephie, saying, “I appreciate you letting Jessica come to dinner last night, but we obviously missed out on very important conversations because she was there.”

“Don’t worry, Vitaliy. She’ll be okay with everything soon. It’s just a little overwhelming for her right now. I didn’t want to jump straight to him being the King of the Underworld the first time she came to dinner,” she said, laughing.

Vitaliy looked surprised again. “They turn red every time you call him that?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t actually know the answer to that question. You tell me,” she said, laughing.

Vitaliy laughed at her. I kissed her temple, then pushed her back toward Andrei and Ivan. She ski*ed back over to them to continue her warm up and stretching
session.

“How do you deal with her constantly surprising you with the most amazing things?

I laughed. “You do get used to it after a while. Hang around her long enough and she’ll unlock some new level for you, too,” I said, laughing at his shock.

A la

503

Adrik

Andrei and Ilya got in the ring together, after Viktor and Aleksei were done, as well as Eduard and Stephen. Sephie was right. They both wanted to prove themselves. It was an even better match than Ilya and Misha had been. Training Sephie had made Andrei pay attention to his own technique. He was also faster now, as he had to stay ahead of her at all times. Aleksei was quite impressed with both of them..

“We should do this more regularly. I think it’s good for all of them,” he said as he stool and watched.

“You guys are always welcome. Sephie talked Ivan into sparring with her once a week for the foreseeable future. Show up when you want in,” I said.

He looked surprised. “She asked to spar with him more?” I nodded my head. “She’s no scared to do so?”

1 laughed. “Those two have a special relationship. She couldn’t be scared of him if she tried. She knows he’s the biggest challenge. She’s determined to get good enough that he doesn’t have to hold back with her.”

Aleksei’s sly smile stretched across his face. “I remember someone else who was much the same when he was younger,” he said, putting his hand on my shoulder. “It’s why you’re the only one that doesn’t need to get in the ring very often.”

“I do see some of the same determination in her that I’ve always had. For her, though it’s so no one can ever hurt her again. She has survival as added motivation.”

“Heaven help the next person that tries to hurt her. We’ll all go after them,” he said, seriously before he walked back to talk to Vitaliy.

I watched the rest of Andrei and Ilya’s match, looking forward to seeing Sephie and an. I never thought I would be waiting to watch my fiancée fight one of my guys, but I couldn’t imagine it any other way. She was perfect for me. Other women didn’t exist for me.

Andrei and Ilya were both pleased with themselves when their match was over. They both stepped out of the ring near me, as Sephie and Ivan were now standing with me waiting their turn. Sephie’s gorgeous smile was making the entire gym bright. “Ilya! Your training is much better! Bubba is deceptively fast now, too. He’s so close to teaching me how to kill people with just my thumbs. So. Close,” she said emphatically as she hugged Andrei’s neck.

Ilya was all smiles. “My goal is to be able to keep up with Ivan at some point,” he said Ivan raised an eyebrow at him. Sephie grinned at him.

“Keep sparring with Bubba then. He’s an amazing trainer,” she said, following Ivan int) the ring.

I put my hand on Andrei’s shoulder. “Training Sephie has made you better than ever you’re much faster now,” I said.

He chuckled. “I have to be to stay ahead of her. It’s the only advantage to being so much smaller than the rest of us.”

Ivan and Sephie had a quick conversation in the middle of the ring before starting. They were both clearly happy about being in the ring together. We all saw Sephie flip her switch. She wasn’t angry. She’d long ago figured out how to keep the power without the anger, but she switched to serious in a second. Ivan’s smile faded quickly as he soon realized that my level-up was giving her an unexpected advantage

Andrei looked at me, his eyes wide. I looked at Misha, Stephen, and Viktor across the ing, all looking just as shocked as they watched her. Not only was she just as fast as Ivan now, but she was perfectly countering every single one of his moves. I’d starred with Ivan plenty of times. He was not holding back. She was making him work, even more than she did last time.

Vitaliy and his men were just as shocked as all of us. Vitaliy walked to me, asking, “how?”

“When I leveled up, she got a significant upgrade though me because we’re so connected. Ivan got some through her, but not as much.”

I just heard Vitally cursing as he watched them. Both of them were having fun, but it really looked like they were trying to kill each other. More than ever before, I could feel Sephie’s power. She had figured out how to let her demon help her, without stepping forward. Her eyes were normal, but her demon was definitely helping her. And enjoying every second of it.

Their match went on much longer this time than the last time they’d sparred. Sephie’s endurance was definitely no longer an issue. She felt incredible. She looked incredible. She was incredible.

When they finally agreed to end the match, with no clear winner this time, everyone else in the gym applauded. Every single one of them was impressed with how well she’d done against Ivan.

Ilya was still standing close enough that I could hear him when he told Andrei, “I think I should make her my goal, not Ivan. I think she could kick my a*s,”

Andrei laughed. “I know she could,” he said, a very obvious look of pride on his face

king her up and holding her in the air for a few moments. He was proud of

Sephie hugged Ivan when they were done. He wrapped his massive arms around her her as well. When he set her down, she turned to Andrei, running to the edge of the g straight to him. He wrapped his arms around her, picking her up as well. He swung her around a few times, as she thanked him and he told her how proud he way of her. It was a very sweet moment, as both of them were elated with her performance.

He finally set her down and she walked to me. Her beautiful smile was still spread wide across her face. “I think I might’ve gotten a bigger boost from you than we first thought,” she said, tucking herself in my side.

“I think you figured out how to let your demon help you, too,” I said, kissing her tereple

“You felt that?” she asked. “Of course you felt that. I don’t know why that surprises . Did my eyes switch?”

I shook my head no. “Not that I saw. They looked normal the whole time, but she was definitely helping you. And very happy about it.”

She giggled. “She was very happy about it. She might’ve enjoyed that more than I did even.”

Ivan walked up to us. “Princess, I don’t think anyone but your gdda*n prince has made me work that hard.”

“I did have help. Full disclosure,” she said, grinning at him. The rest of the guys join us.

“What help?” Misha asked. He looked at me, thinking I was going to be the answer this question.

“Her demon,” I said.

“Really??” Misha asked. He looked quickly to Andrei and then to Stephen. They both nodded at him. “New life goal,” they all said at once,

“Your eyes never changed though, sestrichka,” Viktor said.

“That’s the interesting part. She figured out how to let her demon help without her stopping completely forward,” I said.

“You’re going to have to teach me how to do that as well, princess,” Ivan said.

Vitaliy had overheard the conversation. He was always very curious about how everything worked. “Explain,” he said. He was a man of many words, if nothing else.

“When we use our demons, we relinquish a little bit of control, so to speak. That’s why our eyes turn black. It’s their power, but we’re still mostly in control. Just from behind the scenes, if you will. Sephie figured out how to use her demon’s power without her demon needing to step forward. It’s why her eyes didn’t change. She got a significant power boost and someone on the street would never know where it came from,” I said.

“Will you all be able to do that at some point?” Vitaly asked.

“Not sure. We only just found out she could do it,” I said.

“That’s how most everything works with us. She figures out she can do it and then shows the rest of us how to do it as well,” Ivan said.

“She gives us new life goals to aspire to,” Misha said, grinning at her.

“How do you know you can do these things, sladkaya?” Vitaliy asked Sephie.

She shrugged her shoulders. “Nobody told me I couldn’t, I guess,” she said, making everyone laugh, Vitaliy’s laugh might’ve been the loudest, even.

She was getting better about panicking when all the attention was on her, but she was very shy about it still. I felt her shrink against me slightly. I just wrapped my arms completely around her, holding her tightly against me. “I love you so much, Persephone. I felt her relax and take a deep breath, content to have my arms around her.

“Um, Boss. I hate to up, but she needs to stretch again. It seems to help herbs from getting tight,” Andrei said.

Sephie stood up straighter and kissed me quickly, saying, “I have to listen to him or he won’t let me play with Ivan again.” We were all laughing as she walked away. following Andrei.

Ivan looked at me, still amused, but quite serious. “I’ve seriously never seen her look so good. I don’t get many challenges, but she was a legit challenge today.”

“I could tell. You rarely have to put in effort. It was hard to tell who was putting in re effort a few times there, her or you,” I said, still very proud that she’d made him work that hard.

He chuckled. “I know I was a few times. She’s quick.”

“Good. It’ll be good for both of you to do this regularly, then. Can’t have her shield getting soft,” I said, walking further into the gym to get my own workout in before we went back upstairs. I smiled to myself the entire workout, thinking about nothing but Sephie the entire time.

Author’s Note: It is in my best interest to finish this story. If you’ve ever wondered why so many authors disappear from this platform and never finish their stories, I feel confident in saying it’s because they can’t handle the pressure and nagging from the readers. You can argue about how we should “grow thicker skin” as one reader commented after coming unhinged at me, but I would like to point out the very real fact that creativity does not work well under pressure. It needs space. Space I am currently not getting. I appreciate you all for reading. I do not appreciate those of you who feel like you have license to micromanage my time. I’ve worked on this story every single day for the past 6 months and there are still mistakes that many people enjoy condescendingly pointing out. I’ve also been working multiple jobs while trying to have a life. It is in my best interest to finish this story and make it the best it can possibly be. For those of you that are waiting patiently, I see you and I appreciate you. For those of you that are displaying classic signs of addiction, please understand that I am petty cough to withhold all chapters until I’ve finished this story just to teach you patience. My creativity does not, nor will it ever, care about your need for instant gratification. I will say it one more time: it is in my best interest to finish this story. Give me the space to do so and stop demanding to know when the next update is going to be. I update each week.

504

Adnk

My mind was wandering to Sephie for most of my meetings throughout the day. Thankfully, I didn’t have many and the ones I did have weren’t very serious. She never failed to impress me with each new thing she came up with.

I felt her close to my office when my current meeting was wrapping up. Our connection was so strong now that it was getting easier to tell where she was and who she was with at all times. I did have a few moments of guilt that it took me so long to find her when she and Ivan were taken. If it happened now, I’d be able to find her immediately. I did take some solace in that.

I felt her warmth as she broke me free from my thoughts before my meeting had officially ended. She knew.

As soon as my associate walked out of my office, she walked in, her wide smile stretched across her face. She was carrying coffee. Our inability to satiate our s*xual appetite was cutting into our sleep. We were both tired.

“I love you so much right now,” I said, as she handed me the coffee.

“I know,” she said, grinning at me. “You need to be sharp. We’re leaving to meet with the mayor and DA after your next meeting is over.”

“Oh?” I asked, loving that she knew my schedule before I did. She knew I liked it what she got bossy, so she would be extra bratty sometimes just to drive me a little

more crazy.

“Mmm hrum. We’re meeting in a parking garage, apparently, like some kind of clandestine secret meeting, so I get to check that off my bucket list. I’m gonna need everyone to be completely on point,” she said, trying to hide her smile that was threatening to show itself.

I laughed, pulling her into my lap. “You might need to stop. Literally everything you do turns me on right now. I don’t want to have to suffer through my last meeting with a b*ner,” I said, my lips next to her ear. I felt her breath hitch.

“You like it when I’m all bi*chy and bossy,” she said, grinning at me.

“I very much do,” I said, as we both heard the elevator doors ding to signal the arrival of my last meeting of the day. I kissed her quickly, then said, “you’re welcome to stay for this one. It’s Neal.”

“I’ll say hello, but I promised Ivan I would help him be even more aware of what’s going on around him,” she said. “The Wonder Twins are going to be my g*inea pigs.”

Viktor walked in with Neal as Sephie stood up to greet him. They exchanged pleasantries and after she had asked him a few questions about the building project, she politely excused herself.

Neal sat down across from my desk, a small smile on his face. “Please don’t take this the wrong way, but the more time you two are together, the more beautiful that woman gets.”

“I could not agree more,” I said.

On the way to meet with the mayor and DA, we were all very serious, very focused. Stephen had gone ahead with a team of his own and set up across from the building, but once we were in the parking garage, his cover would be limited. We weren’t necessarily worried about Doug or Eric, but we still wanted to be prepared for anything. To the point that even Sephie was armed for this meeting.

We had also agreed to have Kostya on standby. Viktor and Kostya had devised a way to make it happen very quickly, so Viktor just needed to quickly touch both of them and Kostya could fix them. If I was going to rely on these two, I wanted to make sure I did everything in my power to keep them loyal. I did not want another Henry to deal with.

We’d decided that Viktor was going to check both for weapons when we first arrived. It would be quick, it wasn’t out of the ordinary to do in these kinds of situations, and they likely wouldn’t question it. Kostya could fix them and they would never be the wiser.

Eric and Doug arrived shortly after we did. They were supposed to be inside the building in a “meeting. Because the men that Henry had following both Eric and Doug were not well trained, they never followed them into a building. They would wait outside until the two men emerged and would pick up the trail from there. It was a rookie move. There are plenty of ways to ditch a tail once you enter a building.

Or, have secret meetings, in our case. “It did make our lives somewhat easier, so I was always grateful for ineptitude.

The guys were on high alert and didn’t leave Sephie very much space as we walked teet Eric and Doug. She enjoyed it. She never once got irritated with them for feeling overprotective of her. She would tease me about it occasionally, but only just laughs. I knew she secretly loved it. She had spent so many years never feeling truly safe when she was with her uncle especially, but even after she had gottes away and was on her own. Now that she had it, she was never letting go of it.

Viktor walked ahead of the group to check both Eric and Doug, making it look like las checking for weapons. The rest of us watched as their auras lit up while Kostya was fixing them. He made quick work of it. Luckily, neither man needed tooh work. Doug’s aura had started to heal itself after Stephen had scared off the demon that was trying to attach to him.

We weren’t sure exactly how it worked, but we were noticing that a person could heat their own aura, given enough time. It seemed to work even if the person wasn’t necessarily conscious of it needing to be done. Dario’s likely healed tremendly since he’d been hiding at the building. We were all surprised to see how strong it was when Andrei showed us, especially given how broken that man was when he first got back from Colombia.

To their credit, Eric and Doug were both good sports about being checked for weapon you’re still worried about two desk joc*eys,” Eric said, laughing quietly once Viktor

“One can never be too careful,” I said. “Tell me about your plan for Dr. Moretti.”

“I’m guessing you guys have enough firepower to level this building and Kostya were done.

Eric had a small smile on his face. “We’re getting closer to figuring out a way to chat him with the back-room procedures. We can’t find anyone else that can recognize him, but we have an extensive victim list, thanks to Dr. Williams at the herital. That, plus a money trail that we’re slowly uncovering points directly at Dr. Moretti. The brawn, as well as his very clear ties to Salvadori will land him in jail for sure. It will buy us some time to find more about the illegal procedures, which should keep him in jail.”

“With what you gave us on the connection to Salvadori and Dr. Moretti, it gives us rounds to look more seriously at the connection to Henry. I know you said he’s mostly been paid in cash, but there are still ways to find details. We’re working on that one, as well. It’s slightly more difficult, since Henry is trying to do the same to us, from his position,” Doug said.

I was quiet for a moment, making them think I was mulling things over in my head. They had not told me anything I didn’t already know, so far. “Niko and Vito are coming back within the next two weeks. They’re in need of more cash flow, so they’re coming back to try and force the underbosses to collect taxes. We need the people to stop it. They’ll be informed. They’re the reason the underbosses stopped in the first place. This gives you both an excellent opportunity to appear tough on crime. Dr. Moretti can be the first domino to fall, revealing the other connections to S and Henry once he’s in custody. The wild card in that scenario is Henry’s allegiance to Sal. If he uses the police to stop the people, the plan won’t work.”

Eric looked from me to Sephie, who was standing just behind me and between me and Ivan. “How much of this was your plan?” he asked her.

“It was a group effort,” she said.

“That job offer is still on the table,” Eric said. He looked to Doug, both of them thinking over the plan I had just laid out for them. They both nodded in agreement.

“I like it. I do, however, want your word that in the event that we get a judge that’s al’s pocket, unbeknownst to us, and the doctor goes free that you’ll take care of him,” the mayor said. “I don’t want him walking free in this city ever again.”

“That will not be a problem,” I said.

“Do you know when Niko and Vito are coming back?” Eric asked.

“No specific date yet, but we have people watching them. We’ll let you know as soon we know. Once they’re here, everything needs to happen quickly. Sal and Ricardo don’t need any extra time to react to what’s happening here,” I said.

king round the clock to find a concrete connection between Henry and Sal

“We’re ready to move on Dr. Moretti as soon as you hand him over. We have people Once Henry goes down, most of the police chiefs go down with him, as well as his gulfriend,” Eric said.

“That does seem to be one of her favorite positions,” Sephie said, mostly under her bath, but still loud enough that we all caught it. We even heard Stephen Laughing through our earpieces

505

Adrik

“If anything changes, let us know. We’ll do the same. If you have any information we can use that links Henry and Sal, we’ll be happy to take it off your hands.” Eric said.

“Might be worth another look at Sal’s paperwork, “Ivan said silently.

“Agreed.”

“We’ll take another look and see what we can find,” I said. Eric extended his hand to me. I felt Sephie’s hand gently grab my free hand when I went to shake hands with Eric, followed by Doug. She was borrowing my gift. She had likely been snoopire: through their heads the entire time and was making sure her assessment was correct. Since we’d dealt with so many betrayals, she liked to be as confident as possible in her opinion on someone. It meant using everything she had at her disposal to form that opinion.

As we walked back to the SUVs to leave, Stephen said in our earpieces, “Boss, get in the vehicles, but don’t leave until I say.”

“Is there a problem?” I asked.

“I’m not sure. Henry’s guys have reinforcements we weren’t expecting,” he said. “Eric leaving now. His usual tail is leaving with him, along with a few of the new guys.”

Doug had gone into the building before leaving, which meant we now had to wait for him to come back out and leave. There was only one entrance/exit into the parking garage, so we would be seen if we left before him, meaning Henry would be ble to piece it together that we were meeting with the mayor and the DA behind his back.

Viktor sent a quick message to both Eric and Doug alerting them to their newest addition in followers. We only had to wait a few minutes and Doug was back in the garage being picked up by his driver. We waited for Stephen to tell us whether all the tails outside left with him or not.

“Doug is leaving. His usual tail is gone. All but one tail left with the mayor. They suspect something is up. He’s waiting to see who else comes out of the garage,” Stephen said.

“Just one person? You’re sure?” Ivan said.

“Just one. He’s parked not far outside the entrance of the garage, waiting. He showed up with everyone else. They’re not discreet in the slightest. They all had a meeting on the sidewalk, then dispersed to their separate cars. He’s the only one left. Stephen said.

“I could go have a conversation with him,” Ivan said, knowing full well that was not going to happen.

“I have an idea,” Sephie told me. “Stephen, how many car lengths between where this idiot is posted up and the entrance to the garage?”

“One, two…five,” he said.

“And what does the car look like that he’s in?” she asked.

“Dark blue sedan, four door,” he said.

“Which side of the exit is he on?”

“South”

“Misha, can I borrow you?” she asked, extending her hand toward Misha, who was in the front seat. He turned to look at her, curious where she was going with this, but also excited to see the end result.

“What are you thinking, Seph?” Stephen asked.

“There’s a restaurant in the building next door. I can smell it. I’m looking for a delivery truck,” she said.

Stephen chuckled. “You’re a genius,” he said.

She grabbed Misha’s hand, borrowing his gift as they searched the area for a delivery truck large enough to block our watcher in, allowing us to leave without him following us. Preferably without him seeing us to begin with.

“Got it,” she and Misha said together. “Stephen, there’s a truck a block and a half away to the south. Can you and your guys borrow it?”

“Nothing would make me happier right now,” he said. He quickly gave orders to the team that was with him and they put their plan in motion. Stephen was very capable, but one of his greatest attributes was his speed. Once he knew the objective, he wasted no time in completing his assignment.

It was under ten minutes and he was back, saying, “be ready. The truck will be here in two minutes. Kyle is driving. I want to see if we can provoke your watcher into an argument before you guys leave.”

We could hear what was happening through the earpieces. Kyle parked the truck alongside our tail’s car, effectively blocking him in. He then went to the back of the truck, opened it up, and proceeded to act like he was about to make a delivery. Just as we hoped, our watcher got out of his car, trying to get Kyle to move the truck. He pretended to not understand English very well, drawing out the conversation, while giving us instructions in Russian.

“Not yet. He’s pretty pi*sed, but he can still see the entrance. I can bait him to the lack,” Kyle said in Russian, as he pretended to not know what the guy was saying to him.

We waited for his signal, leaving quickly when he said, “now.” We could hear them arguing as we pulled out onto the street and turned down a side street, completely out of view.

Stephen was laughing as he said, “this might be making Kyle’s day. He loves a reason to yell at someone. We’re going to return the truck and we’ll meet you at the penthouse.”

We didn’t have to wait long for Stephen to join us. He was still laughing when he waed into the penthouse. Sephie had tried to not be worried after we lost contact with him, but she couldn’t help herself. She was visibly relieved when he walked in, walking quickly to him to give him a hug. It never failed to make me smile when I saw just how tightly he held onto her. He had taken so long to warm up to her in the beginning, for good reason, but now she was an anchor for him, just as she was for everyone else.

“Very good call on the delivery truck, Seph. Kyle said to thank you as well. He said that was the most fun he’s had in a while. He really enjoys making people angry.” he said as he relaxed his tight hold on her.

She chuckled. “Please tell me he’s still sitting outside the parking garage waiting for us to leave.”

“He was when we left. I almost wanted to leave someone to see how long he would stay there,” he said.

“You, sir, are a little bit evil,” she said. “I’m totally here for it.”

As strange as it sounded to say, it was kind of the perfect end to our day. Sephie managed to make us laugh through every tough situation we found ourselves in now.

“Would you still call me evil if you knew I ordered Thai for us on my way back here feel like you shouldn’t have to cook dinner if you save the day,” he said, his uncharacteristic smile that was slowly becoming more characteristic for him slowly spreading across his face.

She grinned at him. “Same order as last time?” she asked, clearly hopeful he would say yes.

“Of course,” he said.

“You’re my favorite. Don’t tell the others,” she said, once again hugging Stephen’s neck.

“I wish I would’ve known I could do this when I was a kid. I would’ve been much more rebellious,” Misha said, shaking his head as he thought about the day’s events.

“You would’ve spied on the girl’s locker room all day, don’t kid yourself,” Andrei said, teasing him.

“Shots fired, Bubba,” Sephie said, laughing. She looked at Misha and said, seriously, he’s not wrong though.”

Once again, we found ourselves narrowly escaping trouble, faced with a seemingly insturmountable hurdle ahead of us, but we were all laughing with each other like it was completely normal and not the least bit stressful. Because of her.

It had been a few days since meeting with Doug and Eric when Viktor walked into my office, followed closely by Ivan. “We just got word from Battista that Niko and Vito are coming back. They’ll be here in two days,” Viktor said.

“Is Battista still here?” I asked.

“No, he’s on his way back too, though. He said he’s bringing his friend, the arms dealer,” Ivan said, a mischievous grin on his face.

“We need to meet with the same leaders we met with before. Is Chen still the one setting that up?” I asked.

Viktor nodded. “He still won’t let me put him on the payroll for it, either.”

“I can take care of that. He thinks I’m overpaying him for his contractor work so he’s reluctant to take anything more. Truth be told, I’m not. He does fantastic work. I’ll just add to that. And have Neal hand his name out to a few more people,” I said. Chen was a good guy. I was grateful to have his help in all of this. I always took care of those who helped me.

“I’ll set it up right away. You want them here?” Viktor asked.

I thought for a moment. Last time we met with them, it was in my office. Something didn’t feel right about that this time, but I didn’t know what. I looked for Sephie, to ask her opinion on it.

“You have a question, “I heard her say to me as I was looking to see where she was.

“I do. We need to meet with the people who have organized the resistance against the bosses. Something doesn’t feel right about them coming here this time, though, “I told her.

She was quiet for a moment, then she said, “that’s because it’s not. They’re watching the building to see who comes in and out. We should meet somewhere else to protect them.”

Before I could answer her, I heard Misha’s voice, through her head, as well. “Same for me, Boss. Somewhere else is the way to go.”

“Thank you both,” I responded. I looked to Viktor and Ivan, saying, “apparently, they’re watching the building to see who comes in and out. I don’t want to put them in danger by coming here. We need to meet elsewhere.”

Viktor nodded, leaving to make the necessary arrangements while Ivan stayed in the office. “Do you want me to have them removed?” he asked.

“No. Leave them. We’ll make sure they don’t follow us, but if we remove them, Henry will know we know.” I couldn’t help but smile a little at the situation. “I think he still thinks he’s smarter than us,” I said.

“I know he thinks that. Wait until Stephen hears about this,” he said, laughing. “He’s gonna be so pis*ed.”

I laughed with him, looking forward to Stephen’s reaction when he learned that Herby was still trying to outmaneuver us. He was definitely looking forward to being able to break Henry. Stephen was so quiet most of the time, but much like Ivan, we wild occasionally find people that simply rubbed Stephen the wrong way. Henry was definitely one of those people. Henry had no idea what was coming for him.

I found myself enjoying that fact more than I probably should.

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Adrik

Sephie’s old apartment was proving to be more useful than I ever would’ve imagined it would be. I originally kept it in case she ever changed her mind. I knew she was never going to change her mind at this point, but I still kept her apartment for the convenience of an out of the way meeting spot when I needed one.

Chen met us downstairs. If nothing else, he was always early to every meeting he attended with us, proving once again that one could be professional no matter their profession. He was slightly taken aback, as Vitaliy and Battista were with us this time, which meant all of Vitaliy’s men were with us as well.

“You guys are multiplying. This must be serious,” Chen said as he walked up to us in the parking lot of the apartment building.

“Why use 6 Russians when 12 will do?” Sephie said, her mischievous grin on her face.

“Hey, you miscounted, pretty lady,” Boris said in his very thick Russian accent. Battista’s arms dealer turned out to be exactly who we thought it would be. Boris was so tough and crot*hety on first impressions that he made Vitaliy look like a nice guy.

“My bad. We have a baker’s dozen, Chen. Because one can never have too many Russians on their side when the s*it hits the fan,” Sephie said, grinning at Boris. Like all of the men in her life, she found a way to politely put Boris in his place when he tested her. Mostly polite. Afterward, he’s shown her nothing but respect.

“This maybe lesson your country don’t learn too well,” Boris said, laughing as he walked to join the rest of Vitaliy’s men, who were unloading weapons from the back of their vehicles.

Sephie and Chen looked at each other, trying not to laugh. “My entire life, I’ve beented that Russia is the enemy. Now I find out these people are just as crazy as we are, only much larger, Chen said thoughtfully.

“It’s the governments that are the enemy, Chen. Never the people,” I said, pulling Sephie with me toward the stairs to her old apartment. She looked at the building as we walked. I could feel her emotions as she remembered her life before she met ree.

“It always looks so run-down when I see it now. It never used to seem that bad to me when I lived here,” she told me as we followed Andrei up the stairs.

“When it’s all you have, you cherish it. It did its job. It got you through until you found me I told her.

She turned to look at me, her sweet smile on her face. “I never thought about it like that before, but you’re absolutely right. I might love this dingey little apartment a little more right now,” she said.

“I, for one, am grateful for it. It’s proven to be very useful,” I said, pulling her closer as walked into her apartment.

“I, for one, am grateful for you,” she said, reaching up to kiss my cheek.

Misha, who had followed us up the stairs, said, “I can feel you two being disgustingly cute right now.”

Ivan, who was still in the parking lot, but heard Misha over his earpiece, started laughing. “I am so glad I’m not the only one that’s happened to,” he said.

Sephie’s cheeks turned red. She went to apologize, but Misha stopped her before she could even get it out. “Don’t apologize, gazelle. I’m having jealousy issues. That’s why I brought it up,” he said, grinning at her. She went to him, laughing as he ached down and picked her up in a bear hug.

As everyone else finally made it upstairs, Sephie’s apartment got very small, very quickly. We eventually decided that Vitaliy’s men would stay outside, mostly to give us more room. We asked that all the leaders from the resistance in the city were there tonight, not just the ones from Niko and Vito’s area of the city. We wanted to make sure things were as quiet as we’d been told and we also wanted to make sure this everyone was as prepared as possible. It was clear that Sal cared nothing for the people of the city, given his brawn operation, so the idea that he would use the people of the city to cause more chaos was not off the table for him.

Stephen, who was across the street monitoring things from above, alerted us to everyone’s arrival. Surprisingly, Dr. Williams showed up along with the rest this time. He was just as surprised to see us standing in the apartment as we were to see him walk through the door.

Battista laughed, telling Sephie in Italian, “I knew I liked that doctor for a reason other than his willingness to accept massive donations.” She couldn’t help but laugh isfore sharing the translation with all of us silently.

“Dr. Williams, it’s nice to see you here. Unexpected, but nice,” Sephie said as she went to shake his hand.

“That feeling is mutual, although I don’t know why I would be surprised. Of course it’s you,” he said. “I think you enjoy your legend in the hospital more than you let

on and you’re looking to add to it.”

“I mean, who doesn’t want to be immortalized with a few legends told about them? no different,” she said, nonchalantly. Dr. Williams just laughed quietly, shaking his head as he moved off to the side.

Both Ivan and I were somewhat uncomfortable with so many people in such a small stepped quietly behind both of us. I felt het hand find mine, which helped me keep step forward to begin the meeting.

ice. Sephie, of course, felt it. After speaking briefly with the doctor, she

murderous aura under control. I squeezed her hand lightly before taking one

We discussed Niko and Vito coming back, as they were scheduled to arrive the follow day. “The reason you’re here, gentlemen, is that it will send a much bigger message to Sal, as well as the underbosses that are left in the city, if you stop them from collecting taxes once they return. We can and will support your efforts as much as possible, making sure you have everything you need to resist. The message 1 be much clearer if coming from you, however,” I said. “The only request I make is that you leave Niko and Vito alive and hand them over to me.”

“What happens after they’re gone? Are we just going to be fighting you next?” one dlder gentleman asked.

I chuckled. “That would be somewhat foolish of me to provide you weapons for this or not expect you would use them on me should I attempt the same thing later,” I said. “Things will go back to the way they’ve been for years before the other bosses got greedy. I don’t need your taxes. Your communities do. The more money you make, the more you can invest in your local areas of the city. That’s what want and that’s what will happen once the other bosses are taken care of.”

“How do we know you won’t change your mind?” someone else asked.

“You don’t,” Sephie said. “But you do remember how good things were a few years ago, compared to now. This is a much bigger conspiracy than exorbitant taxes. Without the other bosses to harass you, you’ll essentially be left alone. Just like you were before.” She took one step closer to me, pointing at me, as she said, “he is not the problem here. The other bosses are the problem.”

Dr. Williams, stepped forward, adding, “he’s the one that found the doctor that’s been terrorizing this city for a decade. You’ve all heard of someone that’s had some back-room procedure done on them. He’s the same doctor that created brawn, which has been plaguing the city for years as well. This man found that doctor when the police couldn’t. He’s on our side. He wouldn’t be here right now if he wasn’t.”

“Why hasn’t the doctor been arrested then?” someone asked.

“He will be, soon. We needed to make sure we had enough solid evidence that he would be convicted,” I said. “We have that, so now he can be handed over.”

We continued our discussion, as well as making a strategy for how to handle the undebosses when they come to collect taxes once more. It would be dangerous, but the people had strength in numbers. It didn’t hurt that Boris had access to enough power to completely level a block of the city in under two minutes.

He was also willing to donate his supplies to the cause, which he very rarely did. Sephie had been worried that he would also supply the bosses with extra firepower, since I had told her he enjoyed arming both sides of a conflict.

“Most conflicts do not include Ricardo De Luca,” Boris had said. “Whatever it takes to make sure his side is crushed, I will happily provide,” he had told her.

She had studied him for a few minutes before answering, “is it wrong that I find your hatred of Ricardo to be one of your finest qualities?”

Boris had laughed, but Vitaliy actually spoke up in Boris’s defense, telling her, “he’s such a bad guy, sladkaya. Maybe a little rougher than some of us, but not a bad guy

My father had known Bons for most of my life. Boris had helped him get out of a few ticky situations, even. Vitaliy spoke the truth. Boris wasn’t all bad. He just preferred everyone think the worst of him. It meant less effort he had to put in to nang an impression. When everyone thinks the worst of you, it’s easy to prove them right or wrong. Boris was simply saving his energy.

Once a plan was in place, the weapons were loaded into their vehicles and everyone

separately. Dr. Williams hung back for a few minutes before taking his leave,

wanting to check in with Sephie one more time. He fought it most of the time, but there was still a scientific fascination with her after her time in the hospital that he couldn’t always suppress. It irritated Ivan

King of the Underworld by RJ Kane

Chapter 507

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Adril

I admittedly stayed a few steps away from Sephie on purpose because I was enjoying the irritation I felt from Ivan when Dr. Williams approached Sephie again. I felt his bubble go up around her. I was sure there was no reason for it other than he didn't like it when the good doctor showed too much interest in her.

"I know you said you've been healing well, but you were very beat up. Still no issues with your lung?" Dr. Williams asked Sephie. She looked surprised when she felt Ivan's bubble, but at least he allowed her to hear Dr. Williams through him. I wouldn't have been surprised if he cut her hearing off completely just to be a s*it. I was going to be her ears if he did, just because I was enjoying this a little too much. She answered Dr. Williams, saying, "only if I exert myself a little too much do I have problems catching my breath, but it happens very rarely. My arm and shoulder are mostly back to normal and my ribs only hurt if I do way too much. I have very good trainers who insist that I properly stretch just so that doesn't happen though." She threw a glance at Andrei who was listening in on the conversation and winked at him.

"How often do you struggle to catch your breath? Is it frequent?" he asked.

Andrei walked over, catching on to what was happening as well. He wasn't as irritated as Ivan, but he wasn't thrilled about this conversation either. "It's only happened twice in the last month. Both times she was doing more than she should've been doing." Andrei said, smirking at her.

Dr. Williams looked from Andrei to Sephie, silently asking for confirmation. "It's true. Sometimes I forget and try to be normal," she said, shrugging her shoulders. "But they all take very good care of me, so nothing to worry about, doc."

Dr. Williams ran a hand through his hair, looking between her, Ivan, and Andrei. "Well if it continues to happen, don't hesitate to come in for a check-up," he said.

"No offense, doc, but I would rather avoid that. That being said, they will drag me to the hospital kicking and screaming if they have to should they think something is wrong with me."

He laughed, studying her for long enough that both Ivan and Andrei stepped slightly in front of her. It was enough of a move to break him from whatever thoughts he was having. I was still enjoying watching when I noticed Andrei's demon was angry Andrei still looked completely calm, but his demon was raging.

It was completely different from everyone else. He was actually much more frightening I would much rather deal with someone who was visibly angry than to deal with Andrei. He was completely cool, outwardly, but I could tell he was thinking of at least 47 different ways to kill the doctor in that moment.

As Dr. Williams pulled out of the parking lot, I walked to the three of them. Sephie knew Andrei was mad; they were having a silent conversation between the three of them. When she felt my arm around her waist, I could feel the worry as she looked up at me.

"Tell me what he was thinking." I said. She chuckled softly, amused that I already knew what was going on.

"I felt Ivan's irritation through Sephie, so I paid attention. The doctor has some weird fascination with Sephie since he saw her shaking in the hospital when she was away from you. It's turned into somewhat of an obsession, but he can't bring himself to ask her about it." Andrei said.

"That's what has you ready to follow him and rip his head off?" I asked.

Sephie looked up at me, grinning. "You can feel him too?" she asked.

I shook my head no. "Andrei? No. Andrei's demon? Absolutely. He's going complete aehit in there right now." Sephie giggled.

"No, it was him replaying checking her over in the hospital in his mind that did it. When he lifted her hospital gown to check for internal injuries." Andrei told me.

I felt Sephie grab both of my arms and wrap them around her waist as she held onto them. Her grip tightened as she felt my anger making an appearance, which only served to make Andrei and Ivan even more angry.

"Boys," Sephie said, sternly. "You all intimidate the absolute f*ck out of that man. It will never be an issue unless I'm left alone in a room with him." She paused, then added, "under heavy sedation, since he clearly knows how to paralyze me." Her body shuddered at the thought.

I looked at Ivan. "Your bubble was just because he irritates you? Or did you actually see something on him?"

Ivan laughed. "No, he's clean. I'm just irritated with him. I didn't know what he was thinking about, but I knew he's been strangely fascinated with her. That's not a good combination in my world."

"You were right to do so. I knew he was fascinated by her. I did not think it was to that extent or I would've come over," I said, still smoldering.

Sephie was somewhat indignant with us. "You three act like I can't handle myself." She held her thumb and forefinger up, with barely any space between them. "I'm this close to being able to kill him with just my thumbs," she said, giggling

"It's not a matter of whether you can handle yourself, love. It's more a matter of his disrespect. It's not something I tolerate. I know he wouldn't stand a chance against you," I said, turning her to face me. I pushed a few curls out of her face, enjoying that they immediately returned.

"He also suspects something is different about her eyes. I didn't think he ever caught it, but he did a few times when she was in the hospital and when she went. back for check-ups," Andrei said. "He only ever caught glimpses, but his curiosity is getting the better of him."

"We should only ever be in situations where we're wearing our contacts around him, and hear me out here, we just all show up one day and switch them to black and enjoy watching him s*it himself," Ivan said.

I laughed, along with Sephie. "See? I told you that idea would work for someone at some point," I said, pressing my lips to hers.

Once we were back at the penthouse and alone, I brought the subject up again with Sephie. "I don't want you to think that I think you can't take care of yourself," I started. Her sweet laugh cut me off. She immediately pressed her lips to mine, wrapping my arms around her waist and pressing her hands on my chest.

"I don't think that. I was teasing. I absolutely adore how protective you all are of me. It's a massive confidence boost for me. Honestly, you're all lucky that I'm not more of a s*it than I am. I could just be a major bi*ch to everyone knowing that you guys would clean up my mess," she said, grinning at me. "I know that no matter who's with me, I'm always safe. From anything and anyone. Hell, I even know that about Vitaliy's men, too."

I smiled at her, some of the irritation from earlier managing to come back. She searched my eyes for a moment, then asked, "you're just irritated with him? Not anything else?"

"Having my mind go back to your time in the hospital was unexpected," I said.

"I see," she said, chewing on her bottom lip. She looked up at me, her eyes wide and innocent. "I think we need to take your mind off that." She raised her hand to my face, her finger running lightly over my facial hair. "How should we do that?" she asked, one side of her lips curling up into a smirk, her bottom lip still between her teeth. In one instant, I completely forgot everything but my need for her.

*uck. I love her.

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Sephie

Adrik had kept his schedule purposely light the rest of the week, given that Niko and Vito were scheduled to be back. He wanted to be available in the event we were needed for anything. He made sure he had extra people throughout the city, just in care. Because we both knew he didn't necessarily have to get up at a decent hour, as Nike and Vito weren't scheduled to land until later that afternoon, we both woke up. much later than usual. It didn't help that he spent much of the night before claiming me after the doctor incident in the parking lot of my old apartment building.

I was deliciously sore this morning, but I can't say I minded it. I thoroughly enjoyed his protective streak. I was already considering ways to make it appear on a more regular basis, I enjoyed it so much.

I groaned when I stretched, my muscles protesting being stretched. I heard Adrik chuttle next to me. “My fault,” he said, rolling over so he was on top of me.

“I know you're not even the slightest bit sorry for it, either,” I said, running my hands through his messy morning hair.

“Not even a little,” he said.

I laughed. “You realize he's only fascinated by me because of the relationship I have with you, right?” I asked. He raised an eyebrow at me, asking for more of an explanation. “Bubba missed it because he was so angry at the other stuff. I don't blame him. I almost missed it, too. He's completely fascinated that you were able to control my shaking just by touching me. He saw me lose control when I came back with Ivan to get his stitches out and start shaking. He knows Ivan and Viktor helped me, but he also knows you completely stopped it. He knew I was about to lose my s*it on him the one time he chastised me for not eating at my check-up. That's when he caught a better glimpse of my eyes, but he knows you somehow contained that as well. He's almost just as fascinated with you as he is with me, but really, I think he doesn't understand our relationship. He just knows on some deeper level, he would like to.” I kept running my fingers through his hair while I talked. His eyes closed, enjoying my touch.

His eyes opened, softening as he looked at me. I could feel the pull in his chest as he thought about the doctor being jealous of what we have, rather than him being jealous of the doctor.

“Full disclosure, I didn't tell you last night on purpose,” I said. “I might have to find ways to make you jealous more often.”

There were times when Adrik would smile at me with the look of a man that had no worries in the world, even though I knew he had the weight of the world on his shoulders pretty much at all times. He had a boyish grin that would make my knees weak every single time I saw it. He gave me that grin just before his lips found
mine.

I couldn't help but wrap my body around his, I felt my warmth spread through my entire body, thinking about just how much I loved this man. So completely, in fact, that others were fascinated by it and wanted to study it.

I felt the familiar stretch as he slowly slid inside me, needing once more to make mes. To prove to me that he was mine and I was his. I laughed quietly against his lips, pulling him closer to me as he pushed deeper inside me. He knew exactly how to make my body putty in his hands and he used that information freely.

My breath was heavy, my body sore, but already pushed to extreme levels of pleasure from two strokes from this man. And he knew it. He broke the kiss, leaning up enough that he could look at me, his boyish grin still across his face. It made his features softer and se*y at the same time. If I wasn't already completely in love with him, I would think he might be trouble from the look he was giving me.

His hand trailed down my body, leaving fire in its wake. I moaned at the pleasure his touch ignited, the warmth helping to wake up my already sore body. He felt my body starting to come alive and increased his rhythm. His hand ran down my leg; looking behind my knee, he pulled my knee up toward his shoulder as he drove into me. He kept his control, as he could feel how sore I was already, but he still managed to push me over the edge almost immediately.

I grabbed his shoulders, trying to hang on as my back arched and my body gave in completely to him. It was my favorite way to wake up. Sore muscles aside, this man could make my body feel things I never thought possible. His rhythm increased slightly just before he found his own release, groaning quietly as he collapsed on top of me.

“Definitely going to need to find ways to make you jealous on a regular basis,” I said, ter a few minutes of silence. His body vibrated as he laughed quietly on top
of me.

He got up, pulling me with him. “If we can have a repeat of last night, I'll happily be jealous more,” he said, picking me up to carry me to the shower.

“You drive a very hard bargain, but I accept,” I said, leaning my head on his shoulder

That afternoon, we moved to the house. It took us three times as long to get there, as Henry still had people watching the building. They would try to follow us each time we left. Adrik was enjoying it. He would have at least 10 different SUVs all leave it the same time, all heading in different directions. The tails would inevitably pick the wrong ones to follow, leaving us to go where we pleased. The other SUVs would just drive around the city for hours, keeping the tails busy while we went wherever we needed to go..

I had to admit to enjoying it almost as much as Adrik. The more Henry tried to find about Adrik, the angrier I got at him. I was very much looking forward to the day that Stephen could break him.

Once at the house, we had a few hours of relaxation before Niko and Vito were set to arrive. Adrik wanted to be at the house so Henry wouldn't see us should we need to step in and help with the situation pertaining to the underbosses collecting taxes.

Vitaliy's team was ready as well, along with Boris, to step in and help if needed. Given the ample firepower that our side now had at their disposal, we were hoping we wouldn't be needed, but we were ready just in case.

It was easy to turn it all off and just enjoy a few quiet moments at the house. Adrikave the house staff the rest of the week off, just so we could be alone and didn't have to worry about anything. We still ended up discussing the situation at hand. We couldn't help ourselves.

“So what happens after Stephen breaks Niko and Vito? Do we send them to the same home that Armando is in? It can be our collection home of zombie bosses,” I said.

“Somebody else besides Stephen has to deliver them, though. They might catch on if he shows up with them,” Ivan said..

“I'll allow someone else to deliver each of them. I needed to drop Armando off for me I don't have the same need when it comes to Niko and Vito,” Stephen said.

“It is fun to make up back stories on all of them, not gonna lie there,” I said, laughing

Ivan's phone beeped, alerting him to Niko and Vito's arrival. He glanced at it, telling everyone, “they're here. Now we just have to wait and see how long it takes them to stir up trouble.” Both he and Viktor sent the necessary messages to the necessary people letting them know Niko and Vito had landed and were back in the
city.

Now, the waiting really began.

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Sephie

The hardest part of waiting was feeling like we needed to be ready to leave at a moment’s notice. If things got bad in any part of the city, we all felt like we should be there as quickly as possible. It made trying to do anything else next to impossible.

The first day was spent largely sitting around trying to stay “available” just in case. The second day, we finally got tired of doing nothing, so we went about our day as normally as we could. Even though we all felt like we were waiting for the other shoe to drop, we still managed to have a good time. It was one of the countless things I adored about the guys. I knew we were at least going to have fun doing whatever it was that we were doing.

We ended up on the couches in the back room that afternoon. There was a storm rolling in, with dark clouds above us. We could hear the thunder in the distance. Otherwise, I would’ve dragged them all to the lake with me.

“Okay, so now that we’re all in one spot, I have an experiment,” I said, trying to think of ways to pass the time. Adrik and Ivan were able to still talk to me, no matter where they were. Adrik was able to find me anywhere now. Even I couldn’t do that yet. I think he was making sure that he could find me quickly in the event that we were ever separated again. I loved him a little more for it.

“What kind of experiment and does it involve dissection at any point?” Misha asked.

I chuckled. “No dissection. At least not that I know of,” I said, thinking for a minute. “Look, I’m not going to rule it out now that you mention it.”

The other guys looked at Misha like he was in deep sh*t, which just made him laugh. “Okay, gazelle, what’s your experiment? Save me before they all beat me for giving you ideas,” he said.

I grinned at all of them. “Adrik and Ivan can both still communicate with me and with each other even when we’re not together, but I haven’t been able to do it with you three yet. I want to see if we can make it happen.”

Misha clapped his hands together, like he usually did when there was f*ckery afoot. “This is like an advanced level hide and seek game. I’m completely on board with this,” he said, jumping up from the couch. He ran from the room toward the gym. Once he got farther down the hallway, he yelled, “count to 20! I know the perfect spot!”

We were all too busy laughing at him to bother counting to 20. Ivan said, “I think we should just wait and see how long it takes him to come back. Tell him it didn’t work.”

“You’re a little bit evil, Squish. He’s clearly bored,” I said, still laughing at Misha’s exuberance.

“And stressed. We all know he turns up his antics to relieve stress,” Stephen said.

“I’m wondering if this will work as well. I’ve heard Misha before, but I think it was through your head that I heard him. He was with you when we were talking,” Adrik said.

I concentrated on Misha, trying to see if he could hear me the same way he could when we were in the same room. I waited to see if he answered. When I heard nothing from him, I looked at Adrik and Ivan, seeing if either of them could get through to him. There was now a chance that Adrik would be able to do it, even if I couldn’t, since his latest level-up.

Misha eventually came back after ten minutes. He was still smiling, clearly enjoying being a test subject. “I could hear you, but I’m guessing you guys couldn’t hear my response?”

“No, I didn’t hear anything. I thought it didn’t work because I never heard a response from you,” I said. “Could you hear Adrik and Ivan too?”

“I heard you, then I heard Boss, then I heard Ivan. I answered all three of you, but I’m guessing that’s where it went wrong,” Misha said.

“Interesting. I wonder if it will always remain that way or if you just need to strengthen your connection with your own demon before you can do it too?” I asked to nobody in particular.

“It might always stay like it is now. Your dad said the connection between the three of us is always going to remain slightly different. Maybe this is a perk reserved for the three of us,” Ivan said, his hand rubbing his goatee as he contemplated.

“It’s still useful to know we can at least get messages to you when we’re not with you, Adrik said to Misha. “Even if you can’t answer yet. We still need to figure out how to get messages to Stephen and Viktor without someone needing to touch them.”

“I think half the time Stephen already knows what we tell him,” Ivan said,

Adrik laughed. “I’ve been telling Sephie that for months now.”

Stephen laughed as well. “Sometimes I do, sometimes it’s new information. It’s always appreciated, though.”

“I still haven’t figured out how to get around the need to touch you to relay info, though,” I said, chewing on my bottom lip.

“I think it still has to do with my aversion to having anyone in my head,” Stephen said, giving me the side-eye.

I grinned at him. “Maybe. It’s also how you get information from people when you’re helping fix them, too, so it makes sense it’s the way you get messages. I do find it hilarious that you were so opposed to physical touch when I first met you and now we’re forcing it on you to get messages to you whether you like it or not,” I said, laughing.

“It’s because I’m a vampire. You’re all so freakishly warm that it felt like fire at first. I still have a strong dislike of fire most of the time,” Stephen said, making us all laugh.

“We’ll take this into account once Vlad finally makes it out of customs,” Ivan said.

The following morning, we finally started to hear grumblings from the city. Adrik had extra guys placed throughout the city to keep an eye on things. Every one of the leaders knew to keep us informed of what was happening when they could, as well. We were most worried about police intervention, as we weren’t sure how much Henry would use the police against the people.

Ivan and Viktor started getting reports of small skirmishes between business owners and some of Niko’s guys mid-morning. Our guys started sending word shortly after.

“No casualties on our side. Niko lost a couple guys, which will likely only increase the violence. He’ll want retribution,” Ivan said, after getting off the phone with one of our guys.

“No police yet,” Viktor said, walking back into the room from taking a phone call as well. “I’m thinking Henry won’t intervene until it’s quite obvious his side is losing.”

“Everyone’s still on alert in the city?” Adrik asked. He was stressed about this. He hated the fact that the people were involved in any way, but it was the only way to make the entire plan work, start to finish.

Ivan nodded his head. “Everyone in Niko and Vito’s areas are on high alert. Everyone else is waiting, much like we are. The hospitals have all been alerted as well. They’re ready, if need be.”

“Good,” Adrik said. I could feel his tension from across the room. I walked to him, sliding my arm around his waist. He relaxed, but only slightly, as he pulled me to him.

“Maybe the underbosses will back down again, since they’re met with resistance right away,” I said. I didn’t believe what I was saying. It felt like this was going to get ugly before they backed off, but I was trying to stay positive.

I felt Adrik stiffen as Misha said, “I don’t think that’s going to happen, gazelle.” I didn’t need to look at him or know anymore details. I could feel his nausea. I knew whatever outcome he’d just seen wasn’t a good one.

“Could you tell if Henry got involved?” Adrik asked.

“I didn’t see police, but that’s not to say they won’t eventually step in. They must really be hard up on cash. Niko and Vito are going to go through every single underboss trying to make this happen,” he said.

“As sh*tty as it will be, that actually still works in our favor. Then we don’t need to worry about what to do with the underbosses once this is over,” Ivan said.

Both Viktor and Ivan’s phones started ringing, cutting our conversation short. Adrik pulled me closer, his hand running up and down my back in an attempt to keep himself calm. He used to feel like he was ready to explode anytime his anger was threatening to come to the surface. Now, he felt completely cool. Completely in control. And completely lethal.

I knew if we had to step in, it would not end well for Niko and Vito, or any of their underbosses. They would all be dead by nightfall.

Ivan came back first. “Same situation in Vito’s area of the city. Small skirmish, but Boris’s supplies put the odds in our favor. Vito lost two guys, three more injured. A few injuries on our side, but no lethal wounds.”

Viktor came back in, confirming everything Ivan’s guy had told him. “Injured are on their way to the hospital. One gunshot, one head injury, and one broken bone. Vito’s guys got out of there quick when their guys went down. They’re scared.”

Adrik sighed, but was quiet for a moment. “Tell Sal’s area to be ready next. My money is on those underbosses for the next attempt.

◆

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Sephie

Before we came to the house, Ivan had the brilliant idea to let Dario get in touch with a few of his underbosses. They all knew Massimo had been killed, but no one ever got confirmation on what had happened to Dario. He gave them the same story he was planning to give Sal – he had gotten away from Trino after Massimo was killed and he was in hiding.

When he talked to his underbosses, he made it seem like he was in contact with Sal. They somewhat knew what was going on, but because Dario had been gone so long, they weren't entirely sure of the details. Dario told them that Sal had betrayed him and Massimo and was the reason for Massimo's death. He was trying to come for the city and was planning to take them all out. Niko and Vito were with Sal, but Sal was planning on turning on them too.

It was all fabricated lies, but it was also believable enough that the underbosses knew not to cooperate with Niko and Vito or any of Sal's men. It meant Dario's area of the city was mostly safe, for the time being. It also increased the chance that Dario's guys might take out more of the other bosses' guys for us.

"Your ability to create chaos within the chaos is one of my favorite things about you, Squish," I had told Ivan after Dario was taken back to his room.

"It's one of my best qualities," he said, winking at me.

Viktor had given the guys that were on Dario instructions to allow him to speak to his underbosses, should they try to contact him. It needed to be believable that he was in hiding, but could also be reached. They called him shortly after we got word of the skirmish in Vito's area of the city. The guys on Dario called Viktor immediately, informing him of the news Dario had gotten.

When he walked back into the kitchen, he had a small grin on his face. "Vito actually showed up to meet with Dario's underbosses. They're holding him for us."

"Just Vito? Niko is still out there?" I asked.

Viktor nodded. "Dario told his guys he was working with us now, because of Sal's betrayal. I can send a team to fetch Vito and take him to a safe house until it calms down."

"You already have it all set up, too, don't you?" I asked, smiling at his efficiency.

He smiled his sweet smile at me. "I was hoping this might happen, yes. The safe house is ready to go and the team is waiting for me to say the word to go pick him up," he said.

"You're so efficient," I said.

Adrik looked to Misha, asking for confirmation to send the team to go get Vito. His eyes went black as he checked for outcomes.

As Misha was checking, Adrik said quietly, "I feel like extra guys are needed."

Once Misha came back to the present moment, he said, "you're right, Boss. Extra guys are needed, but it'll work out. They'll get Vito out and take care of his remaining underbosses as well."

"Send them," Adrik told Viktor.

All was quiet as we waited for news. I passed the time by starting dinner. Even if we had to abandon it, it gave me something to do to keep my mind busy. Misha and Andrei both seemed happy to have a distraction as both offered to help me.

Both of them had helped me so much in the kitchen, I barely needed to give them instructions any longer. Misha moved into the sous chef role. He found he really enjoyed cooking. He was really quite good at it, too. He'd made suggestions for a few recipes that made them even better.

Andrei was more the taste-tester and clean-up guy. It was still a very important role for any kitchen. He was listening to Misha make suggestions on changes to make to spices for one dish and laughed, saying, "this is how I know Misha is going to be the first to get married. Women love men who can cook."

"Don't sell yourself short, Bubba. Women also love men who are willing to wash the dishes for them so they can concentrate on cooking. You're just looking for two different types of women," I said.

Misha grabbed a mushroom from the bowl, popping it in his mouth. "I think you're right. I just have no idea what either of those types of women are," he said, grinning at me.

"I don't think you need to overthink it. If I learned anything from my time as Max's friend, it was that nobody has a clue what they want. Men or women," I said.

Adrik had walked into the kitchen from his office upstairs as we were talking. He smirked at me as he walked over to give me a kiss. "They always say you find your person when you least expect it. I used to think that was b*llshit. Turns out it was exactly right. Keep working on making you a better version of yourself than you were yesterday and your perfect person will appear."

"I can't say I disagree with him," I said. "But just make sure she's a tough chick, because I might be planning on giving her hell to make sure she's good enough for you."

Misha chuckled. "Between you and Ivan, they're going to need some kind of superhuman resolve to date me."

"That's the point, my adorable Russian guardian," I said, grinning at him.

Andrei laughed. "I'm just waiting to see what kind of woman Ivan ends up with. She's going to have to be a clone of Sephie and that might not work so well."

"Might not work why?" Adrik asked. I could feel his hackles going up, thinking Andrei was throwing any kind of shade my way. It made me laugh.

"He doesn't mean it as an insult to me. He means that stubborn women don't usually get along with each other," I said. "But I don't think anyone needs to worry. Whoever can put up with him and can climb his very high walls will earn my respect."

Viktor walked into the kitchen, inhaling deeply. "Oh, I'm going to be so happy soon," he said, rubbing his belly. "Vito is at the safe house. Extra guys were a good call, but they got out unharmed. Vito lost another two bosses. I think that might be all his underbosses gone now. We're still waiting for final counts."

"And Dario's men?" Adrik asked.

"They're good. They said to give them a call if needed, otherwise they were staying out of this fight," Viktor said.

"What about Massimo's underbosses? Do we know what they're doing?" I asked.

Ivan walked into the kitchen, answering my question. "We do know. They're sitting this one out along with Dario's men. Massimo's area of the city pushed back harder than the other areas at first. Without Massimo to tell them otherwise, they feel like this isn't their fight."

"Let's hope they don't change their minds anytime soon," I said. "Misha, do you know where Niko is?"

Misha's eyes switched to black without him blinking as he checked the city, trying to find Niko. We could see his grin slowly appear as he found him. His eyes slowly faded to their normal green as he rejoined us in the present moment. "He knows something happened to Vito. He just doesn't know what, yet. He's scared, but he's still trying to send his underbosses back out. It looks like he's more scared of Sal."

"If he sends his underbosses out again, that's the perfect chance to pick him up too," Ivan said.

"That's what I was thinking. Do you have his exact location?" Adrik asked Misha. He nodded. "Can you see if his underbosses are actually going to listen to him and go back out?"

Misha's eyes went black one more time as he checked on that outcome. His eyes didn't switch back to their normal green this time. He was fully in boss mode. We could all feel it. "We need to move quickly, but there's a small window when he'll be incredibly easy to grab."

We didn't say another word. Andrei and I shut everything down in the kitchen until we returned and we were out the door within two minutes, on our way to grab

Niko.

Viktor and Ivan coordinated extra guys to meet us close to Niko's location. Adrik wanted to stay out of sight as much as possible, but he was also nervous about Niko getting away. We would serve as backup for the extra guys. He wanted it to look like the people of the city had revolted, more than he had stepped in. It was just one more way to give a f*ck you to Sal and Ricardo. If the people of the city rejected them, it was a very big hurdle to them ever coming back. And Sal knew it.

Misha-spent the drive to Niko trying to get as many details of the layout of the building he was in as possible. He shared everything with Andrei and Ivan. They relayed the information to the guys that met us a block away.

We stayed behind while they left to grab Niko. The whole thing was over in under twenty minutes and Niko was on his way to a separate safe house from Vito

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Adrik

I couldn’t help but feel a huge relief once I knew Niko and Vito were in our custody and unable to escape the city once more. They had lost more underbosses in a few hours than the city had lost good people, so I was considering it a win. Boris was the help the people needed to defend their businesses and stand up to the bosses once and for all. Best of all, it looked like we weren’t involved.

Now our plan to return peace and order to the city would finally be set in motion.

After Sephie and the Wonder Twins restarted dinner, I made a call to the mayor, as well as Trino. I wanted both of them to know that our plans would be moving forward, likely at a quick pace. Doug was prepared to hold a press conference announcing the arrest of Dr. Moretti. After that, it would be revealed that he had ties to both Sal and Henry. Sal would quickly discover that coming back to the city was no longer an option for him.

Trino needed to be prepared for anything when it came to Martin. The Mexicans were still very much a wild card in all of this. They were unpredictable. They were savage. I detested working with them. Trino had sent a very strong message when he took over, but people like that only listen to violence. They’d grown bolder since they had Sal’s backing. We were hoping that boldness would die with Sal, but we were also prepared to send a message they would never forget.

“Jefe, are you going after Sal and Ricardo first?” Trino asked.

“That’s the plan so far. Unless you tell me there’s a better reason to go after Martin first,” I said.

“No, no. I think they need to fall first. I think without them, the Mexicans won’t be as big of an issue. I’ve got plenty of eyes within Martin’s circle that can get word to me of his plans. Same for the Mexicans. There’s talk, Jefe. You have time to meet before you leave?” he asked.

“Yeah, it won’t be for a few days. How urgent is this? Do you need to meet right away?”

“Tomorrow, Jefe. I think you’re going to be able to shed more light on the situation,” Trino said.

“Tomorrow night. Chen knows where. We’re being watched right now so I don’t want you at the building. We’re not there at the moment, but we’ve got a spot we can meet.”

Sephie noticed my clenched jaw when I walked back in the kitchen. She immediately freed up her hands and wrapped her arms around me. “That doesn’t look so good,” she said, resting her head against my chest.

I sighed. “I don’t know yet. I just know that now I feel better about it,” I said, running my hands over her back and through her hair.

She looked up at me, searching my eyes, looking for answers to questions she didn’t want to bother me with. She found what she was looking for and put her head back on my chest. We stood in silence for a few minutes when Misha said, “Boss, Trino knows about the Mexicans praying to the Saint of Death. He’s having trouble connecting that they know something about Martin and his deal.”

I put my hand on the back of Sephie’s neck, pulling her away from my chest. “You asked him to look?”

She smiled sweetly at me. “I would prefer you weren’t so stressed. Yes, I asked him to look. I know how much you hate surprises. I also know it’s not something Trino wanted to discuss over the phone.”

I leaned down and pressed my lips to her. “I love you. More than I ever thought possible.” I could feel her smile against my lips.

“My adorable Russian guardian, do you think we can find out more details on the Mexicans? Like what they know about Martin that seems to have them so sp*oked?” she asked Misha.

“I can try, but I’m going to need your help to see if we can translate any of it. We’ve really got to hire a Spanish tutor,” he said, shaking his head.

Sephie giggled, but agreed. “After dinner, though. I’m starving.”

i surprised them both by suggesting they try something new. “Why don’t you both use your demons to see how detailed we can get?”

She grinned at me. “Maybe my demon knows Spanish. This could really work in our favor”

After dinner, the other guys worked on cleaning up the kitchen so Misha and Sephie could try to find answers. We’d discussed what we needed to find out as we ate, so those two set about trying to find the answers to our questions.

When Misha first started looking, both their eyes switched to black, but both of them inhaled sharply, eyes wide. “Whoa,” they both said at the same time, I could feel Sephie’s surprise at whatever she was seeing, but she stayed mostly calm. I could almost feel her trying to understand what was being said.

They watched the movie only they could see for a few minutes. We saw them look at each other, clearly surprised at whatever new thing they’d just discovered. “Well, that was different,” Sephie said as she looked at Misha with wide eyes.

“What was different this time, solnishko?” I asked, curious to find out what had happened.

“It started with snapshots then went to a movie that we were watching, then a movie that we were standing inside of. This time, it was like we had the remote and could pause the scene and walk through it, looking at every detail we wanted to,” Misha said.

“I could look in people’s heads,” Sephie said, her eyes still wide.

“Really?” Andrei asked, now just as surprised as she was. “You’ve never done it from that far away before have you?”

“No. G*d, no. I threatened to try it once with Ivan, but I never actually did,” she said.

“What did you find?” I asked, walking to her side, finally unable to stay away from her any longer.

“They’re scared of Martin, which we already suspected. It’s hard to tell exactly how much they know. Language is still a very big barrier for us,” she said. I could feel her frustration.

“I think we should take a closer look at Martin, gazelle. Maybe we can figure out why they’re so scared of him that way,” Misha said.

I clicked my tongue, pulling her in front of me. “Is it going to zap either one of you? We can’t afford for anyone to get zapped right now.”

Her eyes flashed red as she grinned at me. “You, my King, have enough power to keep all of us going now. I think we’ll be okay.”

My breath caught looking at her red eyes. She felt the full effect it had on me as she pressed herself closer to me, wrapping her arms around my neck for a moment. “Unexpectedly hot,” I told her as she stayed in front of me long enough for me to calm myself down. I heard her giggling in her head, but she never gave any indication of it outwardly.

Once she felt me mostly calm once again, she sighed, stepping away from me. She glanced at Misha, extending her hand to him. “Let’s see if we can find out what our dearest Martin has been up to,” she said.

They watched for several minutes once again. I could feel both Sephie and Misha’s demons getting angry while they watched Martin. Really angry. Everyone else could too. We were all somewhat nervous to see what they’d found.

Sephie immediately turned to look at me once the movie stopped. Her eyes were black, so were Misha’s. Everyone else’s eyes had turned black in response so she knew we were all very aware of her demon’s anger.

“You know this isn’t us, right?” she asked.

“Yeah. Your demons are p*ssed. Quite frankly, it’s making mine p*ssed as well,” I said, feeling the growing agitation inside.

“Same for mine,” Ivan said.

“Mine too,” Andrei said.

“Yeah, this is not going to end well for whoever you guys were watching. I know that much,” Stephen said. He took a step back from everyone, putting his hands in his pockets. It was his go-to move when he felt himself losing control. His reflexes were lightning fast when his bloodlust took over. He tried to contain it by keeping his hands out of the equation.

Sephie, of course, noticed. I felt her anger increase in response to him. “You good, Stephen?” she asked. Her tone had a slight edge to it. She wasn’t mad at him in the slightest. She was just ready to meet his anger with her own if necessary.

“Good, Seph. Just explain what’s happening. It’ll help,” he said, through clenched teeth.

“Martin is going after innocent people,” Misha said. “Women, children, no one is safe from him at the moment. Right now, it’s directed at the people of Colombia, but it looks like he has the people of Mexico next on his list.”

“It doesn’t make sense. Why would he go after the people?” Andrei asked. Even his demon was livid. He still looked completely calm, however. He might’ve been the only one out of us, besides Viktor that did look calm. The rest of us were very clearly angry.

“Insurance,” Sephie said. “He knows the people helped Trino in his rise to power. If he terrorizes them, they’ll be less likely to help Trino overthrow him again because they’ll be exhausted trying to survive him.”

I could feel her nausea coming through her anger. “Come here,” I told her. She walked quickly to me, not meeting my gaze. She just put her head on my chest and held onto me as tightly as she could for a few minutes.

“That doesn’t exactly explain why the Mexicans are scared of him, though. I would think that would p*ss them off and make them go after him,” Ivan said

Chapter 512

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Adrik

“That’s because you did not see the statements he’s making,” Misha said. He looked just as troubled as Sephie felt. I glanced at Stephen, who had gotten his anger under control. He nodded once, walking to Misha. He didn’t even ask; he just grabbed his hand to help him clear what he’d just witnessed.

Viktor walked over after Stephen was done. “We’re going to start being more proactive about this. This needs to happen before you guys go looking for anything pertaining to Martin or Ricardo. I think it will help,” he said, putting his hand on Misha’s shoulder lighting his aura up for all of us to see. We could clearly see the dark spot as we saw Kostya float down and land in Viktor’s hand.

As Viktor and Kostya fixed Misha, Stephen walked to Sephie. He didn’t bother making her move from my arms. He just took one of her hands, quietly helping her release the bad she’d just witnessed. I could feel her instant relief as Stephen helped her open everything back up. It wasn’t as bad as when we helped Battista with his associate, but I could still feel her struggling with what to do with what she’d just seen.

She sighed, her body relaxing as Stephen finished and Viktor took his place. He didn’t make her move either, he just held the same hand that Stephen had. She had a dark spot almost in the same spot as Misha when Viktor lit her up. Kostya fixed it quickly, once again making her feel lighter.

She inhaled deeply. She didn’t move from my chest, but she said, “Martin is using religion as a weapon right now. His demon is making a mockery of every religious symbol Spanish people hold dear. I think that’s why the Mexicans are scared of him. They likely don’t know he’s legit possessed by a demon, but they probably suspect it given his actions.” She glanced at Misha, who looked lighter again as well, but both were still troubled with what they’d witnessed. “I do find it ironic that the Mexicans, who are known for being some of the cruelest cartels in the world, are scared of him right now.”

Misha looked at Ivan. “That should tell you all you need to know about why the Mexicans are scared of him.”

“Maybe we need to adjust our plans and take care of Martin first,” Andrei said. “If innocent people are dying, we shouldn’t leave him to last.”

“Agreed,” Ivan said.

“I also agree. I want to find out what Trino knows. We’ll meet him tomorrow night. I’m not sure he knows the extent of what’s happening. He didn’t seem to think it was as urgent as it is,” I said. “That could turn out to be a bigger problem, if the people he has keeping an eye on Martin aren’t giving him the full truth.”

We moved to the back room to the couches to finish our discussion of what to do about our plans. I pulled Sephie into my lap, leaning her back against me. She felt better, but she was still quiet after she and Misha had found Martin.

“Is the mayor ready for Dr. Moretti?” Ivan asked.

“Yeah. He said he’s ready to hold a press conference announcing his arrest. He’s the first domino. He can be linked to Sal, who can be linked to Henry, who can be linked to the switch-hitting representative. The only thing I’m uncertain of is how Sal and Ricardo are going to react to finding out he’s in police custody. I’m hoping that most of the underbosses have been taken care of today, which will be a very obvious sign that Sal and Ricardo are no longer welcome in the city. By anyone,” said.

“Has Battista gotten the information on what kind of demon Sal made a deal with? Do we know how to deal with him?” Stephen asked.

I shook my head. “I haven’t heard anything on it yet. It sounded like his psychic that he’s been using gets information sporadically from whatever she’s using.”

“I kind of want to know what she’s using to get information. Not that we don’t have alternative means of getting information, but it seems weird,” Sephie said. “I also understand that I have no grounds to call anyone else weird.”

Viktor’s deep laugh filled the room. “Kostya said you are a little weird, but it’s part of your charm.” I could feel Sephie’s happiness at hearing his laugh. The more things returned to normal between Viktor and the rest of us, the happier she got about it. I didn’t even have to ask him to help Misha and Sephie tonight. He just stepped up and did it. It was nice to see.

“He’s not allowed to use words like that. He’s grounded,” Sephie said, crossing her arms across her chest.

Viktor laughed once more, adding, “you might feel better once you know that the deal Sal made is not to the same level as Ricardo or Martin. Stephen will be effective with Niko, Vito, and Sal. Boss will be needed for Ricardo and Martin. He also says we need to be prepared for what will happen when Boss takes care of Ricardo and Martin, but it’s not time yet.” He looked at all of our puzzled faces with a sympathetic, knowing look of his own. “Yeah, trust me. I hate the cryptic messages as much as anyone. Little sh*t won’t budge though. Doesn’t matter how I try to get more info out of him.”

“He apparently takes after his old man,” Ivan said, seriously, causing Viktor’s deep belly laugh to fill the room once more.

“I can’t say I haven’t been thinking about what is going to happen when Boss sends Ricardo and Martin to Hell. I have questions,” Stephen said.

“I think we all do. The main one being how the f*ck do I even do it,” I said, trying not to laugh.

Sephie wrapped my arms around her waist tighter, hugging my arms to her. She could feel my frustration over everything. “I think like most things that have happened with us, it’s going to be something that likely just happens exactly when we need it to happen. Or else you get a visit from someone who explains it to you before it happens. We seem to have enough extra help around us that everything falls into place exactly when it’s meant to.”

We were all quiet for a few moments, contemplating the unknown that we were facing. It was Andrei that broke the silence. “Can someone explain what the difference is between when Stephen is needed and when Boss is needed? I’m still really fuzzy on that detail.”

Sephie snapped her fingers, pointing at him. “Same, Bubba. Same.”

They all looked to me like I should have this answer. “Bold of you all to assume I’d have that answer,” I said, smirking at them. Sephie laughed softly, leaning her head back against my shoulder so she could look at me.

“Did my dad offer any insight into it when he leveled you up?” she asked.

I sighed, thinking back to the conversation I had with Sephie’s dad. “Not really. He just told me I’d be able to do it. We talked more about other things, including you,” I said, kissing her neck.

“Okay, so what do we know already?” Stephen asked. “Armando’s demon was running the show, but apparently not strong enough that Boss’s skillset was needed to take care of him. It seems to be the same for the other bosses. What’s the difference with Ricardo and Martin?”

“Maybe they needed to agree to more that the other bosses wouldn’t agree to. Maybe Armando’s demon didn’t own his soul, per se, but had still taken over in this body. Ricardo and Martin’s demons own their souls?” Ivan theorized.

“That makes sense to me,” Sephie said. “I’m also curious whether Ricardo and Martin are the ones that initiated the deal. It feels more like Armando just gave in to his demon. Like as much as I hate him, he didn’t have an easy childhood. Feels like he just gave in to evil and accepted that’s how life was supposed to go. His demon saw an opportunity and took it. Ricardo and Martin are next level somehow.”

She had been fidgeting with my hands while she thought through the situation out loud with all of us. I could feel the goosebumps rising over my arms the more she talked. “Look at me,” I said when she was finished. She turned toward me, her deep purple eyes making it obvious she was on the right track.

“Purple?” she asked when she saw my familiar smirk that meant her eyes had changed. I nodded.

“Your dad did tell me that the deals Ricardo and Martin made were such that their souls would be tied to those demons for eternity. Armando is now separated from his demon, so his soul gets a fresh start in the next life. For whatever reason, Ricardo and Martin can’t be separated from their demons now, so they both go to Hell,” I said.

“I realize we don’t have specifics on why that is, but I would like to know why that is, at some point,” Stephen said. “Not just because I’m having performance anxiety knowing my particular set of skills are ineffective against those two, either.”

I could feel Sephie’s irritation at Stephen’s words. I knew he was about to get reprimanded.

“Don’t do that, Stephen. Your soul isn’t as old as ours. Your demon likely isn’t either. You’ve already come up with your own level up that nobody saw coming. Who’s to say that won’t continue? Who’s to say that both of you won’t be needed at some point so you also learn how to do it? Demon crushing is still, and will always be on the table, for you. Stop comparing yourself to others.”

He had a sly grin that was turning up one side of his mouth as he tried not to laugh at her being miffed with him. He looked at her for a moment, then said, “you know that feeling that I imagine kids have when their parents admonish them for any kind of negative self-talk? Yeah, that’s me right now. I just got scolded. Why am I so happy about it though?” He finally let a quiet laugh out.

“You’re happy about it because you know she loves you. We all do. Your gift is pretty b*dass on its own, man. I don’t know that I’d want the responsibility of having to condemn people for eternity,” Misha said.

“It’s not something I plan to use often. Assuming I ever figure out how to use it in the first place,” I said.

“We’re a team. We’ve always been a team. We’ll always be a team. Just like before we met Sephie, we each have unique talents that we bring to the table and the team is stronger because of it. Just ’cause we can do weird sh*t now doesn’t mean that changes,” Ivan said. I could feel his irritation that Stephen would doubt himself, even.

“You’re so eloquent, Squish,” Sephie said, giggling.

“One other point that Sephie’s dad brought up was that it had to be all of us for this to work. No one is more important than anyone else. It’s all or nothing. We’re all here, together, in this lifetime for a reason. We all found each other for this. Just like Ivan said, we’ll always be a team. Each member is just as important as the next,” I said.

Stephen was looking at the floor, leaned forward with his elbows on his knees as we talked. His sly grin spread across his face once more as he looked up at all of “So this is what having a real family is like.”

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Sephie

We decided to stay at the house until it was time to meet with Trino the following evening. It meant we had one more day to relax and not worry quite so much about everything else going on.

Because of Stephen’s admission about his wavering confidence in his abilities now that Adrik had been leveled up, I decided that today was the day that he was finally going to the lake. Because he and Viktor were almost always the ones that went with Adrik to his office anytime we were at the house, it meant Stephen hadn’t been dragged to the lake by me like the others had. And it was starting to show.

“Get your coat, Yoden. We’re going on an adventure,” I said once everyone had cleaned up from our morning workouts.

“Well, this sounds like a fun addition to my day. Is it like a side quest kind of mission? Multi–day mission? Do I need to find someone to feed my bearded dragon?”

he asked.

I laughed. “I didn’t know you had a bearded dragon, Yoden. I’ve been to your apartment, even. I never saw it.”

“I don’t. It just sounded like something someone would need to feed when gone for multiple days,” he said, laughing as he walked back toward his room to grab his

coat.

I looked at Ivan, who was in kitchen with me and having a hard time not laughing at our exchange. “I don’t know how you can both love someone so much and hate them just as much all at once,” I said.

“Want company, princess? Or this side quest needs to be a solo venture?” Ivan asked.

“The more the merrier, Squish. I’ve never dragged Stephen to the lake before. Today’s the big day for him. He just doesn’t know it yet.”

“Oh, I’m getting in on that. I’ve been wanting to see this for months now,” he said as he quickly left the kitchen to also go grab his coat.

Adrik walked in as Ivan walked out. He knew my plans already, as we’d discussed it before falling asleep the night before. “I’m stealing Squish, too,” I told him as he walked to me. He wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling me against him. I felt the immediate relaxation of my body as soon as his hands were on me once

more.

“You can steal whoever you like, solnishko. It’s to their benefit to go there with you. I’m surprised they don’t all want to go,” he said, pressing his lips to mine gently.

“I don’t think the others know yet,” I said, giving him my most innocent grin.

He kissed me one more time, then pushed me toward the back of the house when he heard Stephen and Ivan coming back from grabbing their coats. “Go. I’ll keep the others busy,” he said, a mischievous grin on his face.

“This. This is why I love you,” I said, walking quickly to the back doors.

Once outside, the weather was beginning to warm up, but the air still had a bite to it. Enough that I was happy for a warm coat and Ivan’s almost as warm as Andrei’s but not as perfect as Adrik’s body temperature. He wrapped a giant arm around my shoulders as we set off on our mini adventure.

As we walked into the woods, Ivan looked down at me. “I think seeing the stress melt off you helps the stress melt off me when we come here, princess.”

I chuckled. “It is noticeable how much it affects everyone when we’re here. I do find myself wondering if Adrik will ever even tell Vitaliy about this place. I think we all love our little sanctuary a little too much.”

“Ten bucks says if he does tell Vitaliy, he’ll threaten him and his guys to within an inch of their lives like he’s done everyone who works here,” Stephen said.

laughed. “Always wondered why no one ever ratted the location of this place out. Now I know.”

“You should not be surprised, princess. You know how intimidating he can be on a good day. He sat every single person down and explained, in horrifying detail, what he would do to them should they ever reveal the location of the house or that it belonged to him,” Ivan said. He was definitely proud of Adrik in that moment.

Not gonna lie, I was too.

I thought for a minute, then started laughing. “What do you want to bet that’s the moment that Tori fell madly in love with Adrik?”

Stephen thought for a few minutes, in his usual serious way. “That actually holds up to her personality. I always thought Andrei was too nice for her. I think that’s why she didn’t like him as much as she thought she would once they started dating. He’s so quiet, but he looks like the stereotypical alpha male asshole that bitchy chicks like. She thought she was getting someone who she would get a challenge out of breaking, but she got the nicest guy on the planet instead.”

“Poor Bubba. He didn’t deserve to have to deal with her.” 1 sighed. “I do wish more women understood that a true alpha male isn’t domineering or an asshole. Confidence is quiet, not in your face. Bubba is an actual alpha male. He doesn’t need to prove himself to anyone, least of all insecure chicks with murderous tendencies.”

“I think she actually did damage to his confidence,” Ivan said as we came out of the woods to the lake. Ivan headed straight for my favorite spot. I glanced at Stephen, who was still deep in thought, but was also busy taking in the scenery around him. Just the look of innocent appreciation on his face made this outing

worth it.

“I am almost positive you are correct, Squish. I think it was actually kind of similar to Ilya’s relationship. I find myself wondering if there was something extra to Tori that we could never confirm. It would explain why you always hated her, but never had a valid reason why. It definitely seemed like the more Andrei gave, the more she took. Same as Ilya.”

“I would be willing to bet she did have something extra. It sometimes makes me sad that I didn’t discover my gift earlier to take care of some of these people. Massimo is another one I regret not being able to break,” Stephen said.

“I’ve caught myself wondering if we’ll get a second chance at Massimo’s soul. I don’t know how quick someone can reincarnate, but somehow I think that soul will make the same mistakes over and over again. Same for Anthony and Lorenzo,” Ivan said.

I couldn’t help my smile. “I had no idea you guys were putting this much thought into everything,” I said, laughing. “That sounded way more rude than I meant for it to. I didn’t mean for it to sound like I was surprised you guys were thinking. You’re very intelligent.” I kept laughing as I just dug myself deeper into a hole.

“At least we don’t have angels telling us we’re weirdos, thank you very much,” Stephen said, feigning indignancy.

“Fair. Totally fair,” I said, still laughing.

Stephen looked at me, his wide, handsome smile that we were starting to see more regularly across his face. He sighed. “Seph, I don’t know if you’ll ever know how important you are to me, but I think Ivan can also agree that your laughter alone is one of the best reasons we’ve found to keep going.”

“Oh, I’ve told her already that her laughter was the reason for me to come back anytime I found myself in my darkness,” Ivan said.

“I think you guys are giving me too much credit. It’s just the spark you needed to remind yourselves of your own light. Nothing more,” I said, trying to hold back the tears that were threatening to fall.

“I think it’s slightly more than that, but I won’t argue with you,” Stephen said. “Just this once.”

“We’ve all helped each other. You guys help me with everything just as much as I’ve helped each of you. Like Ivan said, we’re a team. Me and six giant alpha Russian bears. I think Misha was right. I think we should start solving crimes when all this is done.”

“Seems like it would be too easy, given that we control most of the crime in the city,” Stephen said thoughtfully,

“Dammit. Now I’ll never get a giant dog,” I said under my breath.

Both Ivan and Stephen laughed. Both looked even more relaxed than they had since we’d gotten our hands on both Niko and Vito. We sat in comfortable silence for a while, taking in the budding signs that Spring was fast approaching,

Finally, Stephen broke the silence. “If I would’ve known about this place before, I would’ve told Viktor to suck it and made someone else be his backup with Boss.”

J laughed. “Everything happened when it was supposed to, Yoden. You were justifiably terrified of me in the beginning. It would not have been the same.” “I’ve been thinking about the differences in everyone’s gifts. I think your gift compliments Boss better than we originally thought, Stephen,” Ivan said.

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Sephie

“How so?” Stephen asked.

“So like with me and Andrei – we’re both sides of the same coin, if you will. He can see good; I can see evil. I think it’s the same with you and Boss, just to a higher level. You save the soul; he destroys it,” Ivan said.

It was suddenly starting to make sense in my head. “Lena told me that when the demon takes over a person, the soul basically dies. But I don’t think a soul can actually die. What I think she meant was that the demon takes over that soul and uses it in multiple lifetimes. That’s why it’s so difficult for someone to get rid of a demon once they have it. Just like us, they become connected to their demon. Bond with it, if you will. Except, unlike us, the demon is running things. And not in a good way. You’re what stops that cycle,” I said, looking at Stephen.

“The deal that Martin and Ricardo made must solidify that connection so completely that nothing can break it, which is why Boss is needed,” Ivan said.

Stephen was quiet for a few moments. It was clear that he was struggling, but both Ivan and I knew enough to let him think through his thoughts and not push him to share more than he was ready to. He finally looked up at both of us. “I know. I’ve thought about all this before. It’s not actually performance anxiety like I said it was. I’m struggling with believing I’m the good side of the coin.”

The sharp pain I felt through my chest was not enough to keep me from quickly moving to Stephen’s side. His arm circled my shoulders as he pulled me into his death grip while he worked to get himself under control. Ivan could feel his pain through me and it was enough that his anger made a brief appearance at what Stephen had been through in life.

“Tell me you’re okay or I’m coming out there,” I heard Adrik tell me and Ivan.

All good. Stephen needed this more than I thought he did. I love you for checking,” I responded. He didn’t say another word, but I felt the pull in my chest that let me know how much he loved me. It was a welcome relief from the pain of Stephen’s past.

Ivan quietly got up and moved to the other side of me so that we were all sitting together, leaning against the long ago fallen tree. “Don’t want you to get cold while we hash this out,” he said, sending low levels of anger my way just to stoke the fire.

Before I could say anything, Ivan spoke. “I sometimes wonder if evil from women isn’t harder to comprehend than evil from men. Everyone almost expects it from men, so no one is really surprised when a guy turns out to be evil. But women are the mothers of the world. The protectors. The healers. The nurturers. It’s so much harder to take when a woman is evil.” He picked up a nearby rock and chucked it into the lake. “When I was at the facility, there was only one nurse that was ever nice to me. The rest of them were just as mean as the doctors. That was almost harder to take than the doctors.”

“Women are…complicated. Even for me,” I said. “It’s why I have such a terrible track record with seeing who they really are. Tori and Giana both got past me. It was a hard lesson for me to learn to not give any special passes just because they’re chicks. Giana was much more of a special circumstance, but even still, she’s still a bitch for the way she handled most of what happened. It’s always been that way for me. Girls have always been worse to me than men, which is saying quite a lot for this punching bag.”

Ivan chuckled. “You have been a punching bag, princess. I shouldn’t laugh at that, but that’s funny.”

“No, you can laugh. Inappropriate humor will always win.”

Even Stephen chuckled. “The three of us might all be punching bags, if you think about it.”

Ivan laughed a little louder. “Maybe that’s why I found it funny. Punching bag recognizes punching bag.”

“Seph’s right though. Women are complicated. Ivan’s right, too. It’s always harder to take when evil comes from women. Until I met you guys, I’d only told maybe one or two people about my sisters. They were both people I trusted. I thought they would believe me. I was wrong both times. They couldn’t believe that my sisters would be that cruel.”

“What if the demons that Ricardo and Martin made deals with are female demons?” Ivan said, trying to lighten the mood. “I think we just solved that mystery.” He was very confident in his hypothesis. Both Stephen and I couldn’t contain our laughter,

“I know I’ve told you before, but your sisters were wrong about everything they said to you, Stephen. I also know that it’s difficult to kick them out of your head for good, so I’ll be here to argue with you anytime you start listening to them again,” I said, once the laughter died down.

Stephen squeezed my shoulders a little tighter. “It’s so weird for me to have people that care about me. I mean, there’s Vlad. He cares. But mostly because I’m his enabler and I recognize that he’s always been ahead of his time when it comes to problem–solving. I mean, his solution for the poor people of the village has yet to

be improved upon.”

“That one was hard for me to get used to as well,” Ivan said. “It still doesn’t feel real some days. If I couldn’t feel it from the princess, I would have a harder time believing it.”

Stephen chuckled. “Glad I’m not the only one.”

“Really?” I asked Ivan.

“Really. I never really thought about it until just now, but being able to feel what you feel helps me believe all of this is real. I would have convinced myself it was all a dream or all of it was fake by now if I wasn’t getting constant reminders through you of how much we all care about each other. So, you see, princess, the connection you have to all of us is not a hinderance in any way,” Ivan said.

me,

“I completely agree with Ivan,” Stephen said. “I could see it happening to the Wonder Twins because they connected to you first, but I still didn’t believe it was real until I felt it myself. Of course, I still have times where I fight myself. There’s still that part of me that believes everything my sisters would tell but then I feel Seph’s joy when she sees one of us.” He turned to look at me, a sweet smile on his face. “Or the love that just drips off you when you see Boss after he’s out of your sight for like 30 seconds. It’s one of the most amazing things I’ve ever seen. Or felt,” he said. I giggled. It really was that bad.

“I want you all to find that special someone that makes everyone else want to puke because you’re so f*cking adorable.”

“We will. Even though you don’t think you are, you’re helping us with that too. If any of us were to meet that someone right now, it wouldn’t work. We wouldn’t be ready. You wouldn’t have been ready to meet your goddamn prince if it would’ve happened three years earlier. It will happen exactly when it’s meant to happen,” Ivan said.

“Squish. You’re so wise,” I said, leaning my shoulder into his.

“We’re like the council of elders right here. Once the city is back to normal, we’ll preside over petty squabbles between the people,” Stephen said.

“I feel like you have experience with this already. How many feuds over goats have you settled in your 900 years?” I asked, trying to sound serious.

“Countless. Sheep and cows, too. Livestock was a hot topic a few hundred years ago.”

We stayed at the lake for a few hours; until our asses got sore from sitting on the ground. Stephen was much lighter after talking things through with me and Ivan. Hell, I was much lighter from talking things through with the two of them.

Ivan offered to be my legs for the walk back to the house. I’d trained them all quite well by this point. They all knew I didn’t walk back to the house. I felt a little guilty that they all spoiled me.

It lasted at least five seconds before I readily hopped on his back.

Stephen inhaled deeply as we started back toward the house. “I understand why Andrei and Misha won’t shut up about coming here.”

I laughed. “This place is magic.”

Ivan squeezed my legs as we walked. “Magic that we were all blind to until you came into our lives,” he said, sending me a little of his fire, knowing I would always appreciate it. I hugged his neck a little tighter.

I spent the rest of the walk back to the house completely lost in my own thoughts. Adrik was right when he said this entire situation was easier because we had each other. That extended to the guys too. I couldn’t imagine my life without them. I couldn’t imagine feeling this confident knowing what we’re facing without every single one of them.

We were an unconventional family, but we were a family. We were all willing to die trying to protect it.

-The End-